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TALES OF KASHMIR

SOMNATH DHAR

ANMOL PUBLICATIONS

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Historical Tales

Introduction

Kashmir has an inexhaustible fund of folk-tales-the popular component of the "literature of the people", as folklore has been aptly characterised. Folk-tales of Kashmir, like "Himal and Nagraya" and "Zohra Khotan and Haya Bund" are distinctly Kashmiri in origin. *Naga* or snake also means a spring in Kashmir: both feature picturesquely in the Nagraya tale. The snake and the spring recur in the "Magic Ring" story. "Shabrang, the Prince Thief" has delightful replicas in Dravidian and Chinese tales. In the Zohra Khotan tale, Zohra, a famed beauty, is relentlessly pursued by a rich merchant; she shapes a clay head and invokes God to transform it into a replica of her own head. The miracle dummy, complete with dripping blood, is presented to the merchant.

The 'Wily Dervish' is outwitted—to the bitter end. Find it out for yourself. Similarly, in "The Tailor and the Jinns" the smart tailor, aided by a weaver, outwits the Jinns; they come away from the forest loaded with gold and jewels and live happily ever after as do most characters in fairy tales.

The Dogri and Ladakhi folk-tales—current in the regions of Jammu and Ladakh in the Jammu & Kashmir State— have a distinct flavour, reflecting the customs, rites and superstitions of these areas. A sampling of these tales is presented to complete the composite cultural spectrum of the Valley.

Altogether, the collection of these folk-tales should prove a source of abiding pleasure to all those, in India and abroad, who are interested in the folk literature of the northernmost state of our country as part of our rich national cultural heritage.

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Broad-bosomed Jhelum

The serpentine river of the Happy Valley, the Jhelum, is no less historical than the Ganga or the Thames. On its banks were situated the great cities of ancient and medieval Kashmir, Pravarapura, Avantipura, Suyyapura, Padampur, Parihaspura, etc. The 'Vitasta', as it was called, by the Hindus in olden days — Hydaspes by the Greeks and Veth by the Kashmiris — saw the chequered march of the ages of the Valley ever since the vast legendary lake *Satisar* was drained by sage Kashyapa. It bore triumphant monarchs, Hindu emperors and their queens, Sultans and Moghul emperors, Afghan and Sikh *Subedars*, Dogra Maharajas, and last, but not least, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Mrs. Indira Gandhi along with Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, in right royal processions over its fair bosom. Indifferent to the saga of Kashmir, the Jhelum ravaged the Valley many a time with devastating floods. Yet the calmly flowing, sinuous, majestic river — broad, smooth and navigable virtually the year round and still used as a great highway of Kashmir — has a special appeal to Kashmiris. Visitors readily fall in love with the 'broad-bosomed Jhelum' as did the Grand Moghuls.

The historical study of the Jhelum is given by way of the Introductory Essay to these historical tales.

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1

Broad-bosomed Jhelum

"A hundred miles of snow-clad mountain peak; On either side uprear their heads to heaven. And, flecked with light and shade and yellow foam, Broad-bosomed Jhelum wends his stately way."

— C.R. Tollemache

The Jhelum is the largest and longest river of the sub-Alpine region of Asia's Switzerland. Its source is the spring of Verinag. The small rivers, Vishau, Rambi Ara, Romshi, Dudganga, Sukhanag and Ningal, and the mountain streams, Liddar, Arpal, Tsunti Kul, Sind, Arin, Madamati, Pohru and still others, constitute its tributaries. The Kishanganga river swells its roaring waters at Domel. Flowing down the mountains into the eighty-four miles of the fertile alluvial valley, and, then again over foothills and spurs into Pakistan and onward, it sees and hears nature in all her moods. On its serpentine course, it is swept by many a wind and swelled by rain and snow through the many tributaries.

The Jhelum is of as much historical interest as the Ganga, the Thames, the Tiber and the Rhine are to the countries wherein they flow. The Chenab, the Ravi, the Indus, and the Tawi have their source in the Himalayas like the Jhelum, but they haven't that romantic interest attached to them which is the case with the Jhelum.

The serpentine river of the Happy Valley, flowing ever so lazily as well as majestically, used to be called the *VITASTA*, in the hoary days. But where was the Vitasta, when according to a legend, borne out by geological research, Kashmir was a vast lake, namely, *Satisar* ? Of course, it came into being when Kashyapa, the grandson of god

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Brahma, drained the valley, named after him, *Kashyapamar* — now Kashmir. Ashoka, the great Buddhist monarch, cruised up and down the Vitasta to see for himself the *Viharas* and Buddhist monasteries which dotted the length and breadth of the Valley. Brahmins of Kashmir were mostly Buddhists in the pre-Christian era. Some of them became great Buddhist missionaries. They must have used the Vitasta, nature's highway of the 'Eden of the East', a great deal. Curious barge-like boats, remote ancestors of the *Khochoo* boats, formed the conveyance that kissed the bosom of the Vitasta everywhere. In these ark-like boats were carried huge stone slabs and blocks needed for the construction of *Viharas* and monasteries, some of which still exist, though in ruins.

The very word *Vitasta* makes me reminiscent of the glory that was Kashmir. Srinagar, the capital of the State, situated on the banks of the Jhelum, was once known as Pravarapura. It was the city founded by Pravarsena II (79-139 A.D). Parihaspura, situated about 20 km from Srinagar, was the capital of the illustrious conqueror Emperor Lalitaditya, who lived in the eighth century. Parihaspura was also situated on the banks of the Vitasta. The Vitasta bore the weight of the mightly barges that carried the massive blocks of grey limestone which were used in the construction of the stupas, monasteries and temples in Parihaspura, Lalitapura and other cities, for in that age, Buddhism and Hinduism flourished side by side in Kashmir and her vassal states. The stone drainage system of Parihaspura, whose traces can be seen in this 'City of Stones', as the folk call it, led into the all-purifying Vitasta. When you visit these grand ruins, where you see the largest of massive blocks used in Kashmir architecture, you notice that the plateau is an isolated one. The Jhelum flows miles beyond. How is it so?

Thereby hangs a tale. Suyya, the founder of Suyyapur, now Sopur, the greatest engineer of medieval Kashmir, diverted the course of the Vitasta and made it meet the Sind *nalla** at the so-called Prayag, otherwise known as Shadipore. Before the time of Avantivarman (855-883 A.D.) — the royal patron of Suyya — the Valley was inundated too often by the Jhelum. His capital, Avantipore, where are to be seen the ruins of his two temples by the roadside, flanked the Vitasta. The site was chosen on a plateau, to escape the depredations of the unruly snake that the Vitasta too often grew into, when the high snows melted or rain fell continuously for weeks together. Suyya had the engineer's vision to the defect of the course of the Vitasta. He had the Vitasta's bed cleared at several points where it constricted between

* Stream.

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mountains.* Thus was the Vitasta rendered harmless. Canals were dug out from it and Kashmir became prosperous.

From 10th to 14th century A.D., the government by Hindu kings and queens was made unstable by the warlike hordes — Damaras, Tantriyas and others. They manned small swift craft over the passive, submissive Vitasta. As Kalhana, the medieval poet-historian of Kashmir, put it: "These hordes were well skilled only in burning, plundering and fighting". Their places of shelter on the banks of the Vitasta were veritable castles, impregnable and strong. They were controlled only by more or less despotic monarchs like Harsha, Kanishka, Mihirigula and others, or by the unscrupulous diplomacy of Didda Rani and other queens.

Much earlier than these unsettled times, the Capital had shifted to Srinagar, the present Srinagar. When the Muslim invaders conquered and settled in Kashmir, they built their palaces on the banks of the Jhelum on the sides of the canals that were excavated from the Jhelum. Among these the Mar Canal commemorates Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, still popularly remembered by the folk as *Badshah* (great ruler).

The calm flow of the Jhelum did not bring peace to the zealot's heart of Sultan Sikandar, better known as Sikandar the Idol-breaker, who, abetted by a convert prime minister, ravaged and razed to the ground magnificent monasteries and massive stone temples, almost wiping out the glory that was Kashmir. He built no structures to replace them. But the Jhelum did pacify and lend peace of mind to the Sultan's son, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1420-70 A.D.). He spanned the bridge, Zaina Kadal, over the Jhelum, in Srinagar. (Near the bridge, on the right bank, is to be seen his tomb, contiguous to the site of the five-

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* Here, I may take the reader back to hoary antiquity to acquaint him with the interesting genesis of the Wular Lake, the largest fresh water lake (20 by 8 km) of not only Kashmir but of the rest of India. In the reign of Sundersena (2082-2041 B.C.), the capital of the Valley was Samdimatnagar, whose site is no other than Wular Lake itself. "A destructive earthquake occurred by which the earth in the middle of the city of Samdimatnagar was rift and water gushed out in a flood and soon submerged the whole city" (Pandit Anand Kaul). The learned writer added, "By the same earthquake a knoll of the hill at Baramulla near Khadanyar tumbled down which choked the outlet of the river Jhelum and consequently the water rose high at once and drowned the whole city together with its king and the inhabitants. This submerged city is now the site occupied by the Wular Lake." Till, lately, the spires of submerged temples were to be seen over the lake when the water level fell in winter. Zain-ul-Abidin built Zain Lank Island on one of these stone temples. Its ruins still exist on the islet.

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domed stone temple of Pravarasena II). He dug canals out of the Jhelum. The Jhelum proudly carried this "Akbar of Kashmir" up and down the Valley in magnificent boats, when he would visit Zaina Lank, the island of the Wular Lake where he had constructed a small palace and a mosque.

Much more by way of grand spectacles were the river processions of the Moghuls among whom Jahangir and Shah Jahan stand out as the greatest lovers of Kashmir. Jahangir visited Verinag, the source of the Jhelum, 75 km above Srinagar. He loved this spot more than any other beauty spot of Kashmir. In 1612 A.D., he enclosed the gushing waters of the blue-water spring in an octagonal basin. In the Moghul building spanning the spring he had the famous picture gallery of Moghul potentates, princes and allies. On the bank of the Jhelum in Srinagar, Nur Jehan constructed the mosque of white polished stone, Pather Masjid, opposite Shah Hamdan's famous mosque. Tearfully, Jahangir left Verinag and Kashmir, when he had paid Kashmir the fourth visit in 1617 A.D., and died on his way over the steep rugged Himalayas with the wish that he wanted "Nothing but Kashmir" on his lips.

Shah Jahan completed the work of his illustrious father at Verinag, by building the aqueducts. The Jhelum saw the glory of the reign of this lover of splendour. He loved the Dal Lake more than he loved the Jhelum. But the Dal pours itself into the Jhelum and so would Shah Jahan's royal boats cross from the Dal to the City over the sinuous Jhelum. The austere Moghul, Aurangzeb, visited Kashmir only once in 1664 A.D. He wasn't much of a lover of nature. He did not fall in love with Kashmir, nor for that matter with the Jhelum.

The Jhelum saw black deeds of rash fury of the Afghans from 1750 A.D. onwards for over sixty years. Its fair bosom was tainted with corpses of the thousands of victims of the fanatic rage of the barbarous Afghans. It expressed its wrath through rising in floods many times, causing fearful devastation to man, his cattle and crops and other property, during this and later Sikh regime, which was heralded in 1819 A.D. Among Sikh Subedars, one at least gave the old happy look to the Jhelum. He was Col. Mian Singh, who was a popular governor and whose river processions over the Jhelum were a sight to see.

The tradition of these processions was carried on by Dogra rulers, whose sway began in 1846 A.D. Especially, did Maharaja Pratap Singh organise the halts of these processions, for, from Baramulla, he would

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cruise up in a royal boat that had a becoming retinue. Maharaja Hari Singh continued the practice for many years. The Jhelum bore Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in spectacular river processions when he visited Kashmir in 1941, 1945 and 1948.

All this, and more, had been experienced and known by the Jhelum. The Vitasta — or *Veth*, into which the word *Vitasta* degenerated — saw the march of the ages, the variegated drama. Its sleepy flow hardly communicated what it knows, unless you dream back the past as I do often.

At very many fond places, mostly solitary spots, I have watched the Jhelum flow by. Let me recollect.

I have left the village far behind. Here I am seated on a bank of the Jhelum. Around me irises flash their heads in clusters. Noiselessly, majestically, the Jhelum glides along. It is gone muddy, due to recent rains. But that does not mar its calm, unruffled look, as it flows past those two picturesque islands, lush with maize and turf and willows all around them. A kingfisher broods over the bank near me, in a holy trance, awaiting innocent prey. Village women, clad in red and yellow *pherans*,* gracefully carry the muddy water in their earthen pitchers on their heads. They walk in a line. Several are giggling. A ponywala descends the muddy ghat to give his obstinate pony a drink. A child is swimming the "women's swim". The opposite bank is lined with tall poplars, leafy Chinars, and graceful willows, in the sylvan beauty that suffuses Kashmir countryside. The reflection of Chinars, garbed in their autumnal glory as reflected in the Jhelum, flash upon my mind's eye; so do other remembered sights of the Jhelum. A strange sense of peace used to dawn on my restless soul, then 'cribbed, cabin'd and confined' in city surroundings and the humdrum routine life. A deeper calm, that is over and above our hurried existence, would pervade my being for the moment.

The scene shifts to spring. I sit in a chair on the Bund of the city, above the Srinagar Club, overlooking the broad-bosomed Jhelum. The warm comfortable sun scintillates on the Jhelum. The ripples dance in circles. Somehow the tiny wavelets remind me of life's unending march, of something that goes on for ever and ever in spite of the seeming transitoriness of human life. The saga of the Valley that the Jhelum knows so well catches a significance, a meaning that is purposive and progressive. My reverie is disturbed by the cackles of the

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* Loose, long gown used by Kashmiris.

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Hanjis* fowl, noise of their children and their raised voices. A fisherman cautiously drops his outspread net. Splashes die down as the net disappears to strangle its catch of the finny tribe. Again I look and wonder at the broad and sparkling bosom of the Jhelum. Have stars come down to inhabit on the Jhelum ? The conceit vanishes as I look at the farther bank where the Chinars are not yet clothed in their green garb. Through their skeletons and over them I see the distant snow-draped mountains whose smooth shoulders shine in the spring. Sun-white clouds hover above the mountains. The calm Jhelum once again soothes the fever of my soul.

To admire best the sinuous serpentine beauty of the Jhelum, you must climb the Shankaracharya Hill from Srinagar. Half an hour's climb rewards you with one of the finest views of the world. You trace the zigzag course of the Jhelum creeping like a snake over the fair Valley, that rises towards the *karewas* which form the picturesque foothills. It is this romantic motif that has inspired the designers of Kashmir. They repeat this pattern of the Jhelum very often in their embroidery on shawls and *Jamvars*.

Flow on, Jhelum! Lend me the serenity that thou hast! Let me share thy calm, which thou hast persevered down the chequered ages ! I can never forget the wistful hours, I have spent on thy banks, or, when ferried up or down in a *shikara* or a house boat, I have dreamily looked and gazed at thy fair bosom, unconsciously assimilating thy message of peace and poise.

Reminiscing over these musings, after two score years, in mid-1991, I ponder over the cataclysmic changes that the Jhelum has witnessed during this time-frame. After having seen the best of times, the historic Vitasta flew by peacefully while its banks were sullied with floating bodies of Kashmiris, done to death in the most gruesome manner, and its water besmeared with the blood of innocents.

The Jhelum, however, has a resilience all its own. It beckons to the migrants, who have fled the un-'Happy Valley' that better times will return, that the trauma of militancy is a passing phenomenon in the march of history. Peace and happiness will return to the beautiful Himalayan environs criss-crossed by the broad-bosomed Jhelum. That is my fervent wish and devout prayer. Amen!

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* Boatmen of the Valley.

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To the Horizons

Much of Kashmir's ancient history is taken up with palace intrigues and assassinations, as Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out in his Foreword to R.S. Pandit's translation of the *Rajatarangini*. The very word *Rajatarangini*, the chronicle by Kalhana, the mediaeval poet-historian of Kashmir, means the 'River of Kings'.

Ashoka conquered Kashmir in 250 B.C. and Kashmir shared the glory of his reign. Indo-Scythian invaders like Mihirigula of the seventh century oppressed Kashmiris. During the 8th century, Kashmir was ruled by Emperor Lalitaditya Muktapidya (724-760 A.D.), and, later, by his equally illustrious grandson, Jayapidya. "In the galaxy of heroes, empire-builders and monarchs of the eighth century A.D. all over the world, the name of Lalitaditya Muktapidya has a lustre of its own." Both Lalitaditya and Jayapidya embarked on "conquests up to the horizons". Lalitaditya's territories extended to Central Asia and included Tibet and Afghanistan, over and above the Punjab, Kanauj and contiguous districts. Jayapidya fought and defeated the King of Nepal. His earlier adventures too were thrilling.

Alberuni, the Muslim historian, wrote about the annual festival that Kashmiris celebrated in honour of the far-flung conquests of Lalitaditya. The tale describes the expeditions, and contains many episodes of the loyal minister, Mitrasarman, and his heroic son, Devasarman.

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2

To the Horizons

"The peril from the thunderbolt ceases on account of the diamond, prosperity comes through the ruby, all kinds of poison are allayed by the emeralds; thus each of the precious stones does its work through its specified inherent power, but by jewel-like men, on the other hand, who are endowed with immeasurable greatness, what is difficult to achieve?"*

If Europe is proud of a Charlemagne or a Napolean, India is justly proud of the illustrious Lalitaditya Muktapida, the monarch of Kashmir whose military glories were not matched by any Indian ruler in the 8th century A.D. A sovereign's greatness in the medieval period was mostly estimated by his conquests. Verily, Lalitaditya belongs to the line of great sovereigns in the East, and in India, like Ashoka and Samudragupta, Akbar and Aurangzeb.

Lalitaditya, the third son of king Durlabhaka, succeeded his elder brother, Tarapida, at a time when the neighbours of Kashmir were unifying under the banner of Islam. Ascending the throne in 724 A.D., Lalitaditya first consolidated his position in Kashmir by subduing the neighbouring chiefs and then proceeded east where he clashed with the king of Antarvadi — the land situated between the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. These annexations were made some time between 724 and 733 A.D., when he defeated King Yasovarman of Kanauj, who, by all standards of the day, was a lesser luminary than the great ruler-general of Kashmir. Political conditions of the country were very favourable for the extensive conquests of Lalitaditya which made him a legendary figure in his own lifetime.

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* RAJATARANGINI, The Saga of the Kings of Kashmir, translated by R.S. Pandit, Taranga IV, 331.

:ts. were achieved by Suyya, who had a mass of

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Ambitious in conquests, he had defeated the mountain-like Yasovarman, ruler of Kanyakubja (Kanauj), and Queen Rata, 'Powerful like Durga', who ruled Karnata (Karnatik): like so many rajahs and feudatory chiefs "she too was gratified when she bowed at the sight of her own image reflected in the round mirror-like nails on the lotus-feet of Lalitaditya".

From Karnata, the great Emperor of Kashmir had led expeditions to the eastern ocean islands, as far as Lanka, where he subjugated every island monarch, — "the roar of ocean waves provided the welcome song of victory". On his triumphant return, he ordered the people of the South that they must wear a tail on their loin cloth that sweeps the road after them, in token of his victory. Defeating the spirited rajah of Avanti (Ujjain), he continued his conquest to the horizons — towards Kambojas (Afghanistan) and Tukhara (Central Asia, south of Altai mountains). He made the people of Tukhara shave half their heads and walk with hands locked on their backs, to permanently acknowledge his victory over them — they do so still. Returning from the long expedition, he made Jalamdhar (Jallundar) and Lohara (Lahore) his dependencies.

Back in Kashmir, the mighty Emperor was received with pomp and show by Mitrasarman, minister for peace and war (who held five offices in all and had ruling princes as his office-bearers), the large-eyed Queen Kamaladevi, his wise councillors and learned Brahmins. The jubilant people were celebrating the yearly festival in honour of the far-flung conquests of their illustrious monarch than whom no greater ruler existed on the earth in the Bikrami year of grace (734 A.D.).

The royal architect had built a town, Lalitapura, to bear the Emperor's name. Lalitaditya, who knew more of these things than the architect, was not pleased with the design. The architect suffered from the anger of Lalitaditya, who himself planned and got built Parihaspura, dotted with many a stone temple and Vihara and Stupa, enclosing images of the gods or the Buddha, cast in gold and silver and bronze. To honour his resolution for conquest to the horizons, he built Sunischitapura and to commemorate the resultant triumph, Darpitapura.

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Among the stone temples that were built in the length and breadth of Kashmir in the munificent reign of the mighty builder-victor-Emperor, he concentrated a great deal of attention on Martanda, the Temple of the Sun (whose ruined colonnades raised in Greek style stand to this day, reminiscent of *the glory that was Kashmir).* The stone-walled temple, dedicated to the sun-god, looked a magnificent marvel of architecture. In Striraja, he had the image of Nrhari put up, which hung in the air, attracted as it was by two powerful magnets, one in the dome and one in the floor.

Touring about the Valley to see for himself the new towns, temples, monasteries, convents and Stupas, all erected on colossal scales, Lalitaditya one day rode an untrained horse all alone, far into a jungle. There he saw two comely maidens, one singing and the other dancing in the traditional religious style. It was an old ritual dance, they said, on being questioned by him; the dance was ceremoniously played on that very spot from one generation to the other. Reaching his camp on the horse, whose rough mettle he had broken, he gave orders for extensive excavations on the spot where the girls danced. The bowels of the earth, as he had expected, yielded two ancient temples, whose door-panels were closed. They were opened and statues of Rama and Lakshmana were found.

These were removed and installed in the better temples of Parihaspura. There Queen Kamaladevi founded the silver image of Kamalakesava and the Emperor that of Muktakesava, resplendent in gold. On a colossal stone, 54 hands high (the stone exists on a plateau, which is made up of excavated ruins and called 'City of Stones' by the folk), was raised Garuda, the emblem of god Vishnu.

One day, in the company of the ladies of the household, Lalitaditya drank wine. It was picturesque springtime. Cherry and almond trees were laden with colourful blossom in the courtyard of the palace. Their sight made the Emperor still more happy. He drank more wine than he ever did and was intoxicated.

Over the pink and white blossom, above the grand stone structures of Parihaspura, Lalitaditya caught the sight of Pravarapura, a town built by Pravarasena, which looked impressive owing to the background of hillocks of Hari Parbat and Shankaracharya, their foothills bedecked with the seasonal blossoms.

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"How does that town look?" the Emperor asked the queen.

"Beautiful", she replied.

"As good as Parihaspura?"

"Well, yes, Sire", returned the tactless queen.

The other ladies stood nervously expectant, as Lalitaditya frowned at the reply. More blood rushed to his face and the added flush gave an awe-inspiring hue to the lustre of his countenance.

"Call Mitrasarman here", he roared at a woman attendant, who hurried away like a frightened cat.

The minister came. Lalitaditya commanded, "Burn the town of Pravarapura at once".

"As Your Majesty commands".

Night fell. From the casement, still surrounded by the ladies, Emperor Lalitaditya watched the town burning. The flames kissed the very sky and made it look frightening. The star-studded sky was smothered in a blood-red mantle. The emperor stuffed himself with more wine like a 'goblin bursting with laughter in wild glee'. The builder of countless towns out-Neroed Nero in revellings while an insignificant town burnt. Till late in the night, he watched the grim spectacle.

Intoxication over, remorse overwhelmed the mighty monarch on the following morning. Why did he issue a thoughtless command, he asked himself again and again?

He was in utter dejection when Mitrasarman entered the council chamber. Reading the Emperor's thoughts, the Minister said, "Maharaj, it was a fake fire. We burnt the hay-stacks of the cavalry of Pravarapura, not the town itself".

Lalitaditya was relieved to hear this and said, "How fortunate we are to have a minister like you, who knows that an oral order by us, when we are intoxicated, is not to be carried out!"

The unassuming minister said that he had merely done what he thought his duty to his master.

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"Anyway, that is all right", observed Lalitaditya. "Of late, we think, we have grown far too stay-at-home. These town-and temple-plannings and excavations do not satisfy our restless temperament. We have had enough of these works. A few rajahs have forgotten they are our vassals. We must show them to whom they owe allegiance".

"Yes, Your Majesty".

They conferred and drafted a plan for another expedition.

Once more the war-loving and ambitious Emperor Lalitaditya mounted his formidable war elephant, Jambudvipa, resolved on victory campaign to the horizons. A lakh and quarter of infantry and cavalry, beside hundreds of elephants, followed the beaters of the resounding kettle drums.

After many a rajah and chief became vassal, or swore their allegiance to his suzerainty, Lalitaditya bent his course towards the eastern ocean.

A man with fresh wounds, with half-mutilated limbs, fell prostrate before Jambudvipa. The Emperor bade the mahout halt the elephant.

The miserable man bleeding from every limb, folding his hands in an abject posture, addressed Lalitaditya, "Great Monarch, I seek thy protection. I am the minister of the king whom you are going to fight. To my ruler I advised to submit to Your Majesty's might and main as the best course. Here, see for thyself, how the rajah has punished me".

Lalitaditya took pity on the hapless minister and had his wounds attended to.

On the following day, the minister said to the Emperor, "In my humiliation I am grateful to you, Emperor Lalitaditya. As a token of my thankfulness I shall show you the route which will find you in half a month's time in my kingdom rather than the three months of the route you are now following. The tribal chiefs are my friends, Sire. with their connivance, we will attack the rajah and defeat him in a short time".

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Marching against the council of Mitrasarman, Lalitaditya and his army took a short cut and lost their way.

A fortnight passed. The country of the rajah was nowhere near. The army was stranded in the midst of a vast desert. "A sea of sand!"

The wounded minister laughed loud and long as he said to the Emperor, "Emperor, know ye, I inflicted these wounds upon myself to work this trick. In my loyalty to my rajah and my country I cared not for my life, nor do I care now. You and your host are lost, lost for good!"

Not having had water for days and hearing these words, the army became restive. The soldiers were about to lose their morale. The Emperor pacified them and addressed the minister, who had played the stratagem, " Know ye, O minister, I am not an ordinary emperor. You have mutilated yourself in vain to corner us like this. Even in the midst of a desert like this we can produce water—"

As he said these words, Lalitaditya struck the hot sand with his lance. Lo ! water came out of the hole. There gushed forth a spring of clear, cold water. The army was refreshed, satiated with water.

Likewise, Emperor Lalitaditya brought into existence other springs in the 'sea' of sand, wherever the army mobile stores of water had to be replenished. The other end of the desert was reached. Crossing over difficult hilly terrain, they surprised the country of the rajah, who along with his wily minister, was properly punished.

Kashmir celebrated the annual festival in honour of the successful termination of the victory campaign of Emperor Lalitaditya when he and his force, loaded with fabulous wealth of the Indies, marched back to the Valley.

Lalitaditya was pleased to meet his wives and sons. More than others, he liked his youngest grandson, Jayapidya, in whom, he said, he saw a replica of himself. Kashmir was happy, proud and prosperous. And: "Lord of the land having made the country golden by his virtues, liberality, valour and the like, cast Indra into the background".

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More towns were founded in wastelands—for had not Lalitaditya procured water in the desert by the grace of God? — so the thirsty may quench their thirst. A yearly permanent provision was made for a public feast at Parihaspura where one lakh and one plate of food were served, with ample *Dakshina**, in honour of the triumphant campaign. The alchemist, Cankana, added more gold to the treasury.

Again — and for the last time — Emperor Lalitaditya set out on the victory campaign to the horizons. He reached the land of Aryanaka (Iran), after traversing unexplored regions. There, for the first time in a life of battles and conquests, he encountered a major obstacle. His prestige was at stake. He must kill himself or submit to an alien ruler. He and many of his personal staff chose the former alternative heroically and thus remained victor to the last. In the dead of the night, he first sent back his army, with the message that he should not be mourned and that, without creating any dissensions, his eldest son should ascend the throne.

Thus ended the memorable rule of 36 years 3 months and 11 days of this mighty monarch of Kashmir.

Kuvalayapada, Lalitaditya's son, ruled for one year and half a month. Armed with the necessary equipment for conquest up to the horizons, he, however, sought inner peace and quietism, and abdicated his throne. When the son of his liege-lord abdicated, Mitrasarman was full of sorrow, and along with his wife and several of his faithful servants, he gave up his life at the confluence of the Vitasta (Jhelum) and the Sindhu (Indus).

Vajraditya succeeded. He loved luxuries more than the art of administration. Consumption caused his death after a reign of seven years. His son, Prithuyapidya, "the destroyer of the subjects", became king for four years and one month. His half-brother, Samgramapidya, dethroned him and ruled for just seven days. On his death, Vajraditya's youngest son, Jayapidya, the illustrious grandson of Lalitaditya, obtained the throne in the order of succession.

Rightly had the wise grandfather foretold that Jayapidya would be like him. No sooner was he installed upon the *gaddi*, than he resolved upon conquest up to the horizons. The campaign was need-

* Offering to the Brahmins.

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ful for many a rajah had taken advantage of the internecine conflict in Kashmir to proclaim themselves independent.

When Jayapidya and his army crossed over the snow-capped Himalayas, Jajja, his wife's brother, usurped the throne. On coming to know of this, Devasarman, Jayapidya's minister for peace, and the son of Mitrasarman, went in hiding with a number of troops. Many soldiers deserted Jayapidya. With limited troops and undismayed heart, Jayapidya advanced towards Prayaga. There he presented one lakh less one horses to the Brahmins with adequate *Dakshina* and thenceforth the waters of the Ganga were sealed in his name as "His Majesty the Illustrious Jayapidya." He laid a wager that if any king presented full one lakh of horses, his seal should then be replaced by the king's seal. (Down to Kalhana's time, 1150 A.D., the waters of the Ganga, sent in flasks to many a place, continued to be marked with Jayapidya's seal). He sent the rest of his troops back to Kashmir with ample rewards and presents.

"Like the sun in the mass of clouds", Jayapidya wandered incognito. He reached Jayanta's city where he stepped into the temple of Kartikeya. There the temple dancer, Kamala, saw him near the gate while she gave her performance. She saw that his hand continually stretched to his shoulder top — a sign, she knew, the handsome tall visitor was no ordinary man; for aught she knew, he might be a prince, who thus rolled up the *Tambulla* from attendants who stood behind him. She sent her confidante, a maid-servant, with a betel to him. when Jayapidya stretched his hand, the maid proferred the betel, which he took, as by habit.

The dance over, the servant-maid conducted Jayapidya to the residence of Kamala. She said to him, "Tell me, O lustrous one, who you are". He was silent. She took him to her bed-chamber.

There he confessed all and acquainted her with the fact that he had vowed not to come near a woman till he got back his stolen throne, and achieved his ambition of conquest. She was in love with him and respected his wishes.

Jayapidya lived at the residence of Kamala. In the small hours, he would go to the river ghat to perform *Sandhya*. One day he went there too early and, on his return, he found Kamala anxiously awaiting his return. She confessed her fear. "Jayapidya, a lion comes in the city

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during midnight. He has struck terror in the hearts of the rajah, princes and warriors alike. You must not stir out early."

Next morning Jayapidya left his residence, at the usual time. He went to the square of the city. There the lion roared towards him like "death's wild laughter in motion". As the lion pounced upon him, he put his elbow in the cavity of his mouth and pierced his chest with a short sword. The lion received a mortal wound, fell down, and died.

Citizens saw the prostrate lion and were happy. The king, Jayanta, himself came to see the dreaded lion in death. He was surprised to find that just one sword thrust had killed the lion. The lion's mouth was opened and there came out an armlet with "His Majesty the Illustrious Jayapidya" written on it. Jayanta understood that Jayapidya was in his city. But when his subjects knew that the mighty Jayapidya was in their city, they were terrified for the name of the great Emperor spelt panic for them.

Jayanta pacified the panicky people and proclaimed that a big reward would be awarded to the one who found out the whereabouts of Jayapidya. Consequently, Jayanta met Jayapidya. The former expressed his long-cherished desire to marry his only daughter, Kalyanadevi, to Jayapidya. The marriage ceremony was performed with befitting eclat.

Once again, Jayapidya was at the head of an army. He conquered five Gauda princes and made his father-in-law their suzerain. Then, with his wives, Kalyanadevi and Kamala, he set out for Kashmir. On the way, he carried away the lion-throne of the king of Kanyakubja. Devasarman got wind of his master's return; he joined him with forces. They gave battle to Jajja, who was killed with a stone by one farmer, Srideva, who had vowed not to eat unless he killed the usurper.

Victorious Jayapidya was back in Parihaspura. Kashmiris resumed celebrating the annual festival in honour of the victorious campaigns of their illustrious emperor. Learning flourished in the happy era which was now introduced. The poet Damodargupta was appointed a leading minister by the Emperor. The scholar Ubhatta was the President of the Assembly. Kalyanadevi was chosen the High Chamberlain. Kamala founded Kamalapura. Savants flocked to Kashmir from other countries. Kashmir became more prosperous than ever before.

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After the passage of a few years, endowed with the warlike instinct of his illustrious grandfather, Lalitaditya, the Emperor left Kashmir for world conquest, at the head of a formidable host. The minister, Devasarman, accompanied him.

Jayapidya reached the precincts of Vimalpura. To know for himself the interior of the castle of the rajah, he disguised himself as an ascetic and entered the castle. Luck did not always favour him as it did in the case of Lalitaditya. He was recognised, arrested and imprisoned in a dark dungeon. Devasarman who awaited with the army knew that some mishap had befallen the Emperor. He retreated to a distance, within the territory of a vassal rajah.

While Jayapidya was bewildered in his cell, a fell disease *Luta* broke out in the country. The victims who contracted a fatal fever and skin eruption as a result of this contagious disease were forsaken by the people. Jayapidya heard of this. He formed a plan of escape. Through a servant he managed to have a herb, which produced fever. The milk of another herb, *Vajravrksa,* covered his body with boils. He looked like one who had contracted the disease.

The rajah laughed as he came to know of this. He had Jayapidya thrown outside the city. When he was alone, Jayapidya joined his forces .The faithful Devasarman embraced him. Now Jayapidya knew well all the weak points of the castle. He attacked the hill-fort of Vimalpura on the vulnerable side, defeated the rajah and made him a tributary rajah to Kashmir. Then he proceeded further with his ambitious expedition.

Jayapidya attacked Nepal. The king, namely, Aramudi, retreated from his principality with his army. Jayapidya pursued him through many a region, till the enemy stationed himself across a river. Jaya pidya saw that the water was knee-deep. Not acquainted with the terrain, which was full of mud, slush and stones, he waded in the water to cross the river. When most of the army followed him, the tide rose, swelling the water immensely. Most of Jayapidya's army was carried away with the rising and rushing waters. The enemy plunged into the water on inflated skins and arrested him.

Once more adversity overtook Jayapidya. Devasarman collected the scattered forces. Armudi imprisoned Jayapidya in a very high

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stone building situated on the bank of the Kalanganadika, for that was the name of the river. In his sadness, Jayapidya composed verses which were full of pathos. From his window he looked out at the reeling depth of the water and saw no means of escape.

The dauntless and wise and faithful Devasarman did not lose hope. He tempted Aramudi through sweet-tongued emissaries, promising him the wealth of Jayapidya and the kingdom of Kashmir. Aramudi took the bait and invited him to complete the agreement. Also, he sent back the greater part of his army to Nepal.

Devasarman, followed by a small retinue, came to see Aramudi. He sent the rest of the army to the bank of the Kalanganadika, opposite to the building where Jayapidya was locked up.

Spending the day at Aramudi's lodging, he discussed terms with him. He said, "Great King of Nepal, the mobile treasure of Jayapidya, which we have to yield to you, is with the army and he knows its whereabouts. I shall, if Your Highness permits me, enquire the captive Jayapidya about it".

"You have the permission, Devasarman", said Aramudi.

Devasarman met Jayapidya in his cell and found him desolate. To him, he said, "Mighty Emperor, my stratagem has well nigh succeeded. You have to reach the opposite bank of the river. Your army awaits you there. Victory will be yours. The grandson of Lalitaditya Muktapida of the far-famed Karkota dynasty must succeed in the end".

"Can one fall from this height and yet live, Devasarman?"

"An inflated skin will do, Your Majesty?" he questioned back.

"It will burst. Then we cannot cross the rushing waters".

"Great Emperor, Devasarman is not at his wit's end. Wait outside for two *Nilkas* (24 minutes) and then see the plan".

Jayapidya spent the time in the privy. On entering the cell, what did he see?

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Devasarman lay dead on the floor !

A piece of cloth was tied around his neck. He had strangled himself with it. To the fatal cloth was tied a paper, on which he had written with blood, torn from his body with his nails.

The last message was: "I am the inflated skin, for my breath is still held in the body. I have tied my turban round my loins. Your Majesty will get into the hold for your thighs and jump at once. Farewell, my master".

For some time, the Emperor was smitten with grief. Regaining his poise, he jumped into the water over the corpse and crossed the waters and reached his army, amidst the acclamations of the soldiers, who were, at the same time, aggrieved at Devasarman's death.

The battle with Aramudi was brief and decisive. He became one more feudatory to Kashmir.

Sad at Devasarman's tragic, harsh and heroic death, Jayapidya gave up the idea of world conquest, and returned to Kashmir. With the renunciation of the campaign to the horizons, he also abandoned the other ways of his illustrious grandfather.

Incited by a minister, Sivadasa, he imposed fines upon his subjects, and multiplied the taxes that were levied from them. He discovered a copper mine in Kramarajya worth crores of *Dinnaras*, but that did not appease his lust for 'Lakshmi the sweetheart of kings'. Brahmins rose against him in opposition to his avaricious extortions of his people. Resorting to hunger strike, they sacrificed themselves in large numbers, to melt the heart of the ruler, but with little effect.

Heartlessly, Jayapidya said to his ministers and sycophants, "If less than hundred Brahmins perish in a day, we must be informed".

Like others, Brahmin residents of Tulamulya struck. In a bold deputation, they, headed by Ittila, waited on Jayapidya.

Ittila nonchalantly addressed Jayapidya, "Emperor, your extortions have fleeced the people. Brahmins everywhere are angry with you. Woe to the sovereign who incurs the wrath of Brahmins.!"

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Flying into a rage, Jayapidya said to Ittila, and the Brahmins, "Who are Brahmans? They are no longer any power. The days of Vishwamitra and Harishchandra are over".

"No, they are not", asserted the Brahmins.

"Fie upon you, you beggars!" shouted the Emperor.

"I punish you with the curse of a Brahmin !" pronounced Ittila, striking the floor with his hand.

The grim words were hardly spoken, when a golden pole fell from the canopy and wounded the Emperor on the head. He had several running sores and he died in a few days. The thirty-one years of the illustrious reign of Jayapidya were marred somewhat by the avarice to which he succumbed in his last years.

> "Kings and fishes which thirst for wealth and turbid waters, respectively, in abandoning their own place follow the wrong path so that by the vicissitudes which are dependent upon Fate, and multitude of fisherman, they are suddenly enticed with, into hell and firm net, respectively."*

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* *Rajatarangini*, Taranga IV, 658.

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Suyya, the Engineer

Sculpture and architecture flourished in ancient Kashmir. Buddhist, Egyptian and Greek styles influenced Kashmir architecture, which lives in the fluted columns, lofty pediments and solid arches of the many monuments. It is not so well-known that Kashmir was celebrated in engineering as well.

Suyya was the greatest engineer of medieval Kashmir. He lived during the reign of Avantivarman (857-884 A.D.), the ruins of whose stone temples exist at Avantipore, about 20 km above Srinagar. Suyya's great engineering feats, described in the tale entitled after him, are even now remembered by the people. The versatile Suyya was a learned scholar; he first conceived the idea of a sanctuary to preserve wildlife among birds and animals.

Major de Lotbiniere, who dredged the Jhelum at a point where it falls over a gorge 8 km below Baramulla, in the reign of Maharaja Pratap Singh, took his cue from and greatly appreciated the skill and originality of Suyya. Sopore—Suyyapur—a town, on the banks of the Jhelum, 11 km from Baramulla, commemorates Suyya. He dug so many canals from the broad-bosomed Vitasta (Jhelum) that it looked " a black female snake with numerous hoods resting on one body". *(Rajatarangini).*

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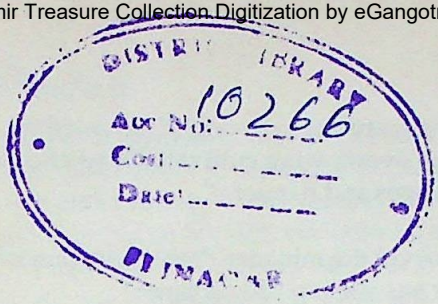

3

Suyya, the Great Medieval Engineer of Kashmir

In the 8th century A.D., Lalitaditya Muktapidya had drained Vitasta (the Jhelum) in the vast vale of Kashmir, because floods caused by excessive rains would damage the crops. The great emperor also had many canals dug out from the Vitasta. After Jayapidya, kings of little virility and vision ruled the Valley. More and more lands were denuded by or submerged under the water as the bed of the Vitasta rose in the course of many decades. The people were unhappy.

Avantipura was the capital of Kashmir. The town was spread about the two magnificent temples, Avantiswami and Avantasvara. Their noteworthy ruins, found 20 km from Srinagar on the roadside, interest the tourists to Kashmir under the foot of a towering craggy mountain, on a rising plateau that flanked the Vitasta and commanded a fine, broad view of the Valley fields, uplands and encircling ranges of mountains. Here lived the King of Kashmir, Avantivarman, (857-884 A.D.), the great builder of temples, who was a saint-monarch.

His courtiers and ministers sat about him as he gazed out of the window. "There, you see the inundated fields," sadly remarked Avantivarman, "the Vitasa creeps over more fields like a devouring serpent. We did much for our people. But how can we rid them of this menace which is starving them now?"

"Sire," replied the prime minister, Sura, "Your Majesty has got dug so many canals. Others, blocked up during scores of years of misrule, when kings and queens were more concerned with their palace intrigues than with the welfare of the people, were cleared. What more can we do?"

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"Something more has to be done," persisted the king, "yearly the Vitasta is rising, overflowing cultivated land and submerging river-side towns, villages and hamlets."

"Sire", rejoined the minister Prabhakaravarman, " the price of a *Khari* of paddy has risen to 250 *dinnaras*."

The King fell athinking.

The poet Anandavardhana broke the silence, after a while, "Sire, in Parihaspura I heard of a man who has been saying for years, 'I have a plan to save Kashmir from floods. I would work it out if I had the resources.' People say he is a madman."

Avantivarman was interested and said, "Tell us more about him".

"I know no more, Sire," confessed Anandavardhana, "but I can have the man traced."

Suravarman, the Yuvaraja, supplied the information: "Sire, the man is a Brahmin, Suyya. They say he wasn't born of a woman's womb. A Chandala woman, named Suyya, found a baby in a dust heap, sucking its thumb in a new earthen pot which had a lid on. The lustrous-eyed babe was not polluted by her with her touch. She had it brought up by a Shudra wet nurse and she gave her own name to the baby. The boy, as he grew up, picked up the Vedas and other learning very precociously. Now he fasts and bathes a lot and leads a very religious life. He goes about saying he has a plan to do away with the floods of the Vitasta. People, as Anandavardhana said, call him mad".

"Very interesting", commented Avantivarman.

"Sire", observed Sura, who was thinking out his opinion so far, "I too have heard about this man Suyya. People's reports and facts may not agree. We cannot be sure that the man is crazy, unless we know better".

"Precisely, that is what we feel. Send your spies, Sura, and find out where Suyya is. Let him be granted an audience before us".

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In a few days Suyya was present in the King's court. The courtiers passed whispering remarks about his strange appearance: he was a very handsome youth with the large lotus eyes they had heard of. The lustre of chastity shone bright on his face. He looked a scholar. There was something extremely individual about him. As he talked to the King in his serious manner, a silence fell on the court.

To the King's question, he replied, "Sire, it's true that all these years I have talked that I have a plan to drain the Valley. For the present, give me only two pots full of *dinnaras*. With that I will bring down the inundated waters by one-third their volume".

"He is crazy", the courtiers cut him short.

"Crazy or no ?" rang Suyya's voice. "Trust me with the money I want, great Maharaja. See the result, Sire. I am not a robber to do away with people's money".

Sura for once did not know what to say. He fidgeted his fingers, a-thinking.

Avantivarman spoke his decision:" Suyya, you will have the two pots of *dinnaras*. Our men will go with you".

There was a commotion as Suyya, accompanied by a few soldiers, left the court, bowing three times, walking backwards, with folded hands and looking towards the throned monarch.

In Madhavarajya (now called Maraj, the part of the Valley on either side of the Jhelum above Srinagar), Suyya dropped one pot of *dinnaras* in a flooded village, Nankaka, where the water was logged up. The Maharaja's men thought that Suyya was indeed crazy.

Then Suyya cruised down the Vitasta to Kramarajya (now, Kamraj, the part of the Valley on either side of the Jhelum, below Srinagar), and dropped the other vessel of *dinnaras* near Yaksodara in the Vitasta, at a point where, in the course of time, boulders, fallen from the mountainous banks, had bottled up the neck of the river. The result was that the Vitasta's current had been reversed and water gushed back into the Valley, overflowing farm, field, garden and town.

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At this time many people starved due to the lack and high prices of foodstuffs. The famished and unemployed peasants living about Nankaka and Yaksodara heard of the pots of *dinnaras* dropped into the water. Afloat on inflated skins, they braved the boulders to extract the *dinnaras*. The displaced boulders at Nankaka were rushed down by the torrential water. More water flowed down. The boulders rolled down from the overhanging mountains had squeezed the Vitasta at Yaksodara. They were displaced by the people, desperately delving for the *dinnaras*. When that happened, some of the water resumed its natural current. Indeed by this process, the Valley was being drained to one-third the volume of lake and river water. Many sand-laden fields were bared as the muddy waters fell in level overnight.

Avantivarman and his ministers saw the working of the 'miracle'. They did not call Suyya crazy or the like any longer. Suyya did not heed or love applause just as he had been indifferent to hostile criticisms of his plans. These were now working after all. That was all that mattered with him. When much of the flood water was drained, he had a huge dam constructed; thus he locked the entire Vitasta for a week. In the meantime, by the organised use of labour of hundreds of men, the bed of the Vitasta was cleared and the boulders were removed where the river rolled down between precipices. Stone embankments were constructed as a counter measure against rolling boulders resuming their position.

The dam was opened. The mad waters leaped down furiously. The Vitasta was finally cleared of obstacles to its smooth course "Covered with mud and asparkle with fish, the land when stripped of water, appeared like the vault of the sky which when free from clouds dispels the gloom of darkness and is full of stars".

No one was more pleased at the success of Suyya than the munificent Avantivarman who freely provided him with money and resources for his countrywide engineering enterprises. Suyya was appointed the royal engineer. Highest honours were conferred on him by the King who also regarded Suyya highly for his meritorious life of chastity and learning.

New channels were opened out from the Vitasta into the dry interior where the rains came but precariously. "With several canals thrown out from the original main stream the river shone like a black female snake with numerous hoods resting on one body." The site of

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

the confluence of the Sindhu (Indus) and the Vitasta was changed by Suyya. The alteration was planned to the general good of irrigation. Indeed, "he made the various streams, whose undulating ripples were their tongues, take to any course at his own pleasure like a charmer of the female snakes".

Next, the dynamic Suyya turned his attention to Mahapadma (Wular Lake) — the largest fresh water lake in India — into which the Vitasta flows. At the point where the Vitasta left the lake, the bed was dredged, with the result that the Vitasta emerged on her course with swiftness, like an arrow from the mechanism of the bow. Through mile-long dykes, much of the rich surrounding land, that was submerged under water, was reclaimed. All types of villages were founded. For miles around the lake, which seemed to stretch to the horizons, Suyya founded a sanctuary of birds and prohibited the killing of birds and fishes. His idea, apart from its humanitarian aspects, was to preserve rare wild species among birds.

On the banks of the Vitasta where she emerges from the waters of the Mahapadma lake, Suyya founded the prosperous town, Suyyapura, (now Sopore), named after him. He founded Suyya Kundala in memory of the woman whose name he bore. In her name he also constructed Suyya Bridge. The philanthropic monarch, Avantivarman, founded many a new town and village that grew up when more and more canals from the Vitasta spread across the Valley. Sura founded Surapura. The King and his minister highly esteemed Suyya, the engineer of untiring industry and fertile imagination who was also endowed with practical wisdom and encyclopaedic learning.

Wherever the banks of the Vitasta were vulnerable, strong stone embankments were constructed. Suyya determined the exact period at which each and every village would require irrigation. With indefatigable energy, Suyya decided the extent and distribution of canal water on a permanent basis. Kashmiri farmers for the first time achieved the prosperity that was never before known by them. Paddy grew in such abundance that, in the lifetime of Suyya, its price per *Khari* fell from 250 to 36 *dinnaras*.

"Neither Kashyapa nor Samskarna had conferred benefits such as conferred with ease on this realm by Suyya of meritorious acts. The reclamation of the land from water, the bestowal of it to pious Brahmins, the building of barrages with stones in water and the suppression of Kaliya, which were achieved by Vishnu in four incarnations of righteous acts, were achieved by Suyya, who had a mass of religious merits, in a single birth only." *

Rajatarangini, Taranga V, 113, 115.

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Queen Didda

In ancient and medieval Kashmir, a Hindu queen could rule as the regent of an infant king and, sometimes, in her own right. Didda Rani was one of the celebrated queens, more of a strong than a beneficent monarch. Younghusband spoke of her "force of character" as well as her "ruthlessness". She carried the latter trait to the extent of tyranny. Her diplomacy and statecraft were coupled with cunning and cruelty. Her 'fits' of religiosity were followed by bouts of an undignified life that knew no restraint.

Didda Rani repelled the attacks of invaders and suppressed the strike of Brahmins, revolts of her people, and rebellion of Damaras with a strong hand that knew no mercy to the vanquished. She put to death her own grandsons and, when she died in 1003 A.D., none of her own descendents lived to succeed her. She disregarded her loyal minister, who had saved her life and her kingdom. And yet she built temples and founded cities. The story of this Catherine of Kashmir, a strange mixture of striking contrasts, is indeed absorbing—and romantic.

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4

Queen Didda

The spendthrift king, Khsemagupta, who loved wine, women and hunting, was on his death-bed in Srikantha Convent in Varahmulla (Baramulla). Afflicted with plague, he succumbed to it. Among his wives, the prominent were Didda and Chandralekha, but he loved Didda the more, and, therefore, he used to be called 'Diddakshema'.* As the funeral pyre of the departed king was burning, the co-wives, wearing the ochre-brown coloured robes, prepared to offer themselves to the fire.

Chandralekha, followed by other Ranis, led the small procession. According to custom, Phalguna, the prime minister, whose daughter she was, gave her the necessary permission. The charming Didda, limping on her lame foot, came last. She made a desperate show of grief. She reached near the funeral pyre, wherein, already, the preceding queens and some of the personal servants of the king, were burning. Phalguna permitted her too to follow her lord unto death. But she was repentent that she had gone thus far.

She did not want to die. Her hold on life was temptingly strong. She loved a queen's life more than she was aggrieved at the loss of Khsemagupta. She hesitated. She had hoped that for state reasons, Phalguna would not allow her to perform *Sati*. Her calculation proved to be wrong. A hundred emotions played on her beautiful face. The minister for peace and war, Naravahana, gentle and soft-hearted, saw that she was loath to give up life. Excercising his powers, he held Didda back. She was saved from sure death.

Thanks to Naravahana, Didda Rani, the daughter of the renowned and redoubtable Sahis, became the guardian of the infant king, Abhimanyu, the son of Khsemagupta.

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* Didda's man.

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After the fickle nature of women, Didda gave her ear to everyone. The backbiter Rakkaka induced in her suspicions against Phalguna, the statesmanlike and powerful prime minister. She had a long-standing grudge against Phalguna for having married his daughter, Chandralekha, to the late king. And he had given her his consent to die after her husband. She readily believed Rakkaka that Phalguna was conspiring to usurp the throne. Phalguna, sending his son to the Ganga with the ashes of Khsemagupta, moved to live in Parnotsa with his treasure and troops.

Didda sent ushers to murder Phalguna as soon as he left Srinagar. When the soldiers heard this, they joined Phalguna in large numbers. The dowager Queen and her counsellers faltered and gave no battle. Faithful Phalguna, who unlike the selfish queen, still lamented the king, laid down his sword in a Vihara but Didda was " ever wakeful to root out the thorns".

Her husband's sister's sons, Mahiman and Pattala, were the aspiring princes, who were among the thorns in her side. She had the former exiled. The two princes were joined by the warrior Himmaka, the valiant Yashodhara, the brave Eramantaka, the prince Uday-agupta and the residents of Lalitadityapura. Civil war ensued. The rebels advanced upon Srinagar.

The Queen threw away the gold box of the *Tambulin*, as she heard the news. Forgetting her manners, she spat the *Tambula* (betel) on the floor. She sent her son to Suramatha. In her panic, she sought the ministers and found that all, except the loyal Naravahana, had fled to safety. The minister for peace and war, well-versed in strategy of war, helped her to bring about a rift in the ranks of the enemy by bribing the soma-drinking Brahmins of Lalitadityapura. Yashodhara was won over and offered the highest post of Commander-in-Chief in the army. The great rebellion was reduced to a storm in a tea cup! The Queen was happy. "She, whom none believed had the strength to step over a cattle track — the lame lady — traversed in the manner of the son of the wind, the ocean of the confederate forces".* Through witchcraft, she brought about the death of the ambitious Mahiman. The 'thorns' were despoiled of their sting. Finding Didda victorious, Rakkaka and others of his tribe fawned on her. Yashodhara, the commander-in-chief, led an expedition against a Sahi chief and defeated him. When the Chief accepted the terms of a dependent, Yasodhara had his *Abhiseka* (coronation ceremony) performed again. Rakkaka whispered to the credu-

* *Rajatarangini*, Taranga VI, 226.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

lous queen that Yashodhara was a traitor and that he had accepted money from the chief. When the victorious commander-in-chief was about to enter the lion gate of Srinagar, Didda sent ushers to banish him.

Yashodhara, thus humiliated, sought the aid of Himmaka and Eramantaka. Together, they stormed the city. Once again, Didda sent the infant king to a *Matha**, where, according to convention, none could touch him. The nervous queen knew not what to do — Naravahana, faithful as ever, arrayed the brave and loyal Ekangas in defence of the capital. By his astute diplomacy, the minister for peace and war brought about a split in the enemy forces. Rajkula Bhutta's men, beating the kettle drums, pierced the enemy ranks and joined the royalist forces. Treason divided the enemy divisions and they were soon overpowered in the neighbourhood of the Sura convent.

Mighty Himmaka, who would not submit to defeat, was slain in the battle. Yashodhara was imprisoned by the Queen. By her command, Eramantaka was drowned in the Vitasta with a large stone tied round his neck. She mercilessly exterminated the ministers who had been disloyal to her. "The terrible knitting of her eyebrows" struck terror in the hearts of the subjects and enemies alike. She appointed Rakkaka the commandar-in-chief. The loyal Narvahana reinforced the army and strengthened the reign of the Queen-dowager over the kingdom of Kashmir. The grateful Queen conferred on him the deserved title of Rajanaka.**

The private life of Queen Didda was anything but commendable. The principal functionaries of the household and others of her choice "filled the vacancy in the couch" of the immoral Queen-dowager. Through her procuress, she admitted to her bed-chamber, Sindhu, the son of a palanquin-bearer, who had caught her notice. She exalted him to the rank of the chief of the treasury. He levied new taxes to fill the coffers of the treasury as well as his own pockets; people nicknamed his office as 'Sindhuganja'.*** Officials, "the pestilence of the people", were busy in extortions from the people who groaned under the increasingly heavy taxes.

No longer was Didda — being the term of endearment and respect for the elder sister that she had been given by the ladies of the household, when she was the senior Rani — loved by the people. They were frightened at the mere mention of her name. She was

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* Monastery ** Best among the Rajas. *** Sindhu's centre of trade.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

Grahanhina— devoid of a limb; also meaning, devoid of Vedic lore. Bereft of the normal use of a foot, she had become cruel, hard, unfeeling — and passionate in matters of sex. Foolishly she exalted Sindhu, the latest lover-favourite, over the heads of ministers of the caste aristocracy.

Sindhu grew jealous of Naravahana. He incited the inconstant Queen against her loyal Rajanaka.

Naravahana invited her to dinner at his place. She went. While dining, she received a message from Sindhu that Naravahana would arrest her. On an excuse, she left, too early, against established custom. She no longer chose to understand Naravahana. Relations between them were strained to the breaking point. The loyal minister was stung to the quick. Seeing no other refuge, he voluntarily gave up his life.

With the suicide of Naravahana, grandeur and dignity deserted the government. The warrior tribe, Damaras, rose in rebellion. The Queen, at her wit's end, discerned no other alternative but to recall Phalguna to her side. The wise statesman was reputed as the conqueror of Rajapuri (Rajauri). His only weakness was show of power. He had aged considerably. He did not administer the government very ably. His secretary, Udayaraja, and the officials, started an unscrupulous plunder of Kashmir and her people.

Abhimanyu was the king in name only; his chief diversion was the study of the Vedas. He suffered from the insidious disease of consumption. The malady was worsened by disgust with the numerous love affairs and the intrigues of the dowager-Queen. "This half moon of the people" (Abhimanyu) died on the third of the bright Kartika (in the year 972 A.D.).

The king is dead, long live the king! Abhimanyu's infant son, Nandigupta, was crowned the king. The guardian-Queen Didda was broken with grief at the premature death of her son. "Sorrow concealed her cruelty and she, through composure, cooled down like the sun-crystal when darkness screened its radiating heat."*

To commemorate her son, Didda founded the shrine of Abhimanyusvamin and the town of Abhimanyupura. In all, while the upsurge of piety lasted, she consecrated sixty-four foundations. She walled many a dilapidated temple. Even her servant-maid, Valga, founded

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* *Rajatarangini*, Taranga VI, 294.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

the Valga convent. The 'sun-crystal' of her cruelty regained its dazzling white heat, after a year's penance. The Brahman-imposed rigours of self-mortification did not complement her nature. Much of her penitence had been a sham to impress the religious Phalguna. When he died, the cruel Queen had the infant-king, Nandigupta, put to death. The next infant grandson was enthroned. After a short while, he too met the same tragic fate at her dreaded hands.

Then she placed on the throne her last grandson, Bhimagupta. A terrible queen, a man-eater woman, ruling over them, the horrified subjects groaned in whispers. "Even in the case of those who are born in high families, alas! the natural bent of women, like that of rivers, is to follow the downward course."*

The Queen of high birth openly spurned her caste and family when she, through a procuress, admitted to her boudoir, a Khasa grazier, namely Tunga. Bhuyya, the minister for peace and war, expressed his disapproval of the liaison. She had him poisoned within a day. She appointed Devakalsa — the son of Rakkaka — who was so far the *Velavitta* (royal astrologer) on the vacant post, and she made Tunga the prime minister.

Bhimagupta grew to be a boy. Abhimanyu's wife initiated him in all the wickednesses of Didda. He understood that his grandmother's way of life was anything but desirable. Didda's spies acquainted her with the boy's developing maturity and the dangerous course he was taking. Boldly, she had him imprisoned, in spite of apprehensions of popular reaction. By her command the helpless prince was tortured to death. The Queen-dowager now herself occupied the throne.

Tunga, her paramour and prime minister, domineered over everyone in the realm. The rest of the ministers of high birth and talent faded before Tunga's five brothers, who dominated the key posts of the government. The corrupt officialdom grew more powerful and tyrannous. The subjects of the Queen suffered untold miseries due to the vile administration. The disaffected people rose in revolt. As before, Didda caused a division among the leaders of the revolution by freely giving gold to the base ones who valued *Lakshmi* (gold) more than the glory of the nation.

The revolt of the fierce Damaras was put down in a Machiavellian manner. When the demoralised rebels were rendered harmless, their ring leaders were annihilated mercilessly by Didda and Tunga.

The Brahmins held meetings. Their union decided that they would use their non-violent weapon of entering upon hunger-strike, a device often resorted to by the Brahmins of Kashmir in emergencies, against a cruel sovereign. The people backed up the Brahmins. In their fury, the people searched for Tunga, whom they were determined to kill.

The Queen gave him shelter in secret quarters. Even her brother's

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* *Rajatarangini*, Taranga, VI, 316.

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son, Vigraharaja, was among the leaders of the rebellion. The Queen, adept in the ways of corruption, bribed Sumantaka and other Brahmins. The strike fell through. Vigraharaja fled. Tunga appeared on the scene with all his native fury. He killed and exiled the Brahmins. Sumantaka and others who had accepted gold were perfidiously thrown into prisons.

Since the death of Phalguna, Rajapuri had become turbulent. Establishing peace in the Valley, the iron-heeled Tunga led an expedition thither. After initial reverses, Tunga defeated and humbled the pride of the Rajah, who agreed to pay tribute to the Queen. The *Nagaradhikarin* (officer in charge of Srinagar) received Tunga in state on his return. The Queen weighed him against silver, and herself against gold, in celebrating the victory over her own (suppressed) people and the tributary Rajah.

Her greying hair and fading vitality made the Queen nervous. She must appoint the Yuvaraja — the crown prince — she thought. Her choice now lay among the sons of her brother, Udyaraja, because all her own lineal descendants were dead.

Summoning the boys in the court, she let fall before them a number of apples, saying, "Let me see how many each one of you can secure".

The apples were not many. The boys gave and received blows, and were injured, while they scrambled for the fruits. The prince Samgramaraj secured the largest number of apples. And yet there was not a single injury on his person.

The Queen was surprised. "You have got so many apples and yet you are uninjured ?" she said.

Samgramaraja replied, " O Queen, I allowed my brothers to quarrel among themselves for the fruits and I kept apart. While they scrambled for the apples, I had most of them".

"One who clamly causes unhappiness to others, can thus better manage his own affairs", Queen Didda thought. To her, he appeared to be the best of the lot, and his tactics the very best.

"Wood albeit devoid of fire may suffice for the reief of monkeys from cold and water, and wind for the purification of the coats of antelopes which purify by fire: the realization of the purpose of a living being who is determined thus depends upon his disposition; in things there is, in reality, no innate principle."*

Pleased with Samgramaraja, Didda Rani appointed him Yuvaraja.

In the year 4079 L.E. (1083 A.D) when the Queen "departed to heaven" the crown prince became king.

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* *Rajatarangini*, Taranga VI, 364

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Shahmir—Kashmir's First Muslim Ruler

Muslim rule was inaugurated in Kashmir by a Muslim refugee who hailed from the frontier area of Swat.

Cultured, bold and diplomatic, Shahmir quickly grasped the fluid state of affairs in the country of his adoption. He identified his interests with her cause of peace and security and built up influence and prestige by winning the confidence of the Raja of Kashmir as well as the local chiefs.

The Fair Valley had been the target of avaricious aggressors. When Achala invaded the land in 1331 A.D. and the Raja fled from the capital to save his skin, Shahmir rose to the occasion and saved the country from chaos.

Says Jonaraja, the historian, who brought Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* uptodate in the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin: "This believer in Allah, calm and active, became the saviour of the people and protected the terrified subjects."

Shahmir aimed at revolutionising the social and political order of the country. The founder of the first Muslim dynasty of rulers of Kashmir has an important place in the annals of the land.

A grateful people made Shahmir the king in highly intriguing circumstances, narrated here.

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Shahmir—Kashmir's First Muslim Ruler

The people of Kashmir had not yet forgotten the reign of terror of Dulacha (alias Zulqadr Khan, a Turk) who had razed the Happy Valley and plundered and massacred its peace-loving inhabitants in 1320 A.D. Raja Sahadeva had fled and Renchan, a bold and crafty Bhatta prince, had become the King of Kashmir. His reign had lasted three years and was comparatively peaceful.

Kashmiris were ruled by the weak-willed, vacillating Udyanadeva. He and his queen held a conference in her tastefully decorated boudoir.

"Kota, my queen, what shall we do?" queried the King. "Today the people thronged to the palace, saying that they have no grains in the city".

"My lord", replied the imperious Queen, not without a hint of sarcasm in her tone, "you have seen the people's condition today. I have known it for months when I roamed in the capital in a man's attire. Know ye, my lord, I have already made arrangements through Bhaṭṭa Bhikshana and Shahmir. Bhikshana ought to have arrived yesterday with three barges loaded with paddy. He must be coming. Shahmir will also be coming. Maybe, he will help his big family and relations at Baramulla first and also curry influence with chiefs but he has to carry out my bidding. As usual, I signed with your ring when I gave the command." She fingered the Raja's signet-ring fondly as she said this, producing it from her breast pocket.

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Daughter of the former commander of the Kashmir army, Kota Rani was every inch a queen. Her tall stately form was complemented by her milk-white complexion. Could he trust his ambitious consort, the king thought a little. She had been the consort of Renchan Shah, the late King of Kashmir, a Buddhist from "Little Tibet", who had embraced Islam during the last year of his reign. He reflected that Shahmir had diplomatically manoeuvred the conversion of Renchan. He feared Shahmir and left him to be tackled by Kota Rani. He admired her for her political sagacity. He was bewitched by her raven hair and her commanding figure, and thus he forgot to figure out whether he could count upon her fidelity. Gifted with uncommon tact and intellect, she carried on the affairs of the state. The timid and indolent king was too glad to let her do so.

Presently the usher came in and bowing, addressed the Rani, "Your Majesty, Bhatta Bhikshana has arrived at the *ghat* with the barges. He awaits orders."

Kota Rani exchanged a look of satisfaction with the King, saying, "You see, my lord, I told you he would come".

Udyanadeva, balancing his knee on a fat pillow, fingered the pretty papier mache set as she wrote and sealed the command for the distribution of the paddy. He did not show any eagerness to read what she had written.

Hardly had the Kashmiris breathed freely than persistent rumours of a new invader crossing the Pir Panchal range floated about. Many feared that it might be the savage Dulacha again. "Dulacha!" His very name revived the memories of Ghenghiz Khan and Halaku among the frightened people. He would raise another holocaust. Where was the invader? Nobody knew exactly; everybody gave currency to unconfirmed reports.

Udhayanadeva lazed in a sunlit portico when the heart-thumping rumour crossed him. He gave a shocked start. He ran about the room exclaiming helplessly, "Kota ! Kota! Where are you? Who'll defend me and the Srinagar city?"

Kota had herself led the pilgrimage to the Amarnath Cave. The King had stayed behind on the plausible plea that he must be on the

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

spot to conduct the affairs of the state, though in truth he was ill prepared to brook the fatigue of the trek to the distant mountain cave.

Idagali, the favourite dancing girl, who filled his goblet, consoled him, " Your Majesty, compose yourself. Kotaji must be coming with Bhatta Bhikshana. Shahmir is here. He'll mobilise forces and fight away the invader, if he dares to advance to the capital."

"No, no", raved Udyanadeva, disconsolate and panicky, "Dulacha will come ! He will kill me! I'm lost ! I must fly away to save my life ! Go, call the treasurer and the stableman."

They came. The King secured his priceless jewellery from the treasury and commanded the stableman to provide him, Idagali and his retinue, with royal stallions. They escaped in the dead of the night like so many rats from a sinking ship.

Queen Kota arrived from the pilgrimage on the following day and found the palace and the capital in a panic. Her couriers, whom she sent after the fugitive king, informed her that he and his few followers had fled towards Western Tibet, and they were beyond pursuit already.

She took stock of the critical situation in a conference with her ministers. Shahmir said to her, bravely and bitterly, "Your lord mistook the invader Achala to be Dulacha and saved his precious skin along with his pretty wench. We'll not desert our posts. We'll fight this Achala and show to the world that every aggressor cannot cross the Himalayan borders with impunity. Bhikshana and I shall command our regiments; Kumarbhatta will busy himself with the diplomatic and strategic side of the battle."

Plans for the ensuing battle were discussed to the minutest detail. Shahmir drafted the Queen's appeal to the people which was read out to the citizens by a courier. Shahmir himself accompanied the courier who, announced by the beat of the big drum, read the appeal at the squares and on the seven bridges of the capital. Shahmir addressed these gatherings and stirred the people to present a bold front to the enemy. It appeared that he had forgotten his grievances against Kota Rani who had appointed Bhikshana minister in preference to him, an error of judgement on her part. (She had forgotten her other debts to him; he had negotiated her marriage with Udyanadeva and he was the

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guardian of her two sons by the late King Renchan, the elder of whom was named Haidar.)

Thanks chiefly to Shahmir, Kashmiris were fired with bravery and heroism. They did not sneak away as they used to on similar occasions but the magnetic personality of this erstwhile foreigner, who had indeed identified himself with Kashmir and Kashmiris, roused them to rally under the colours of the Kashmir focres.

Kumarbhatta's stratagem succeeded very well. Achala's invading forces lost their track over the Pir Panchal Pass. They were dismembered. The Kashmir regiments, commanded by Shahmir, gave them battle. Achala, hedged in a cave by the storming Kashmir cavalry, sued for surrender.

The Queen conceded the peace terms and allowed the invader honourable retreat. Triumphantly, she headed her army back to the Capital. Whereas she was hailed as "Second Didda Rani of Kashmir", Shahmir, more popular than ever, was universally acclaimed as the "Saviour of Kashmir."

Happy at their deliverance, the people lit bonfires in the night and made merry. Kota would not have her palace illuminated for she brooded over Udyanadeva's absence and schemed to have him back on the throne. She did not take Shahmir into confidence and in fact feared that he might occupy the vacant throne.

Her fears were not unjustified. Shahmir was of the definite opinion that the senile Maharaja did not deserve his throne back after his chickenhearted flight from his kingly post. He knew that the royalists who had supported Udyanadeva's taking the throne earlier no longer thought so well of him. As for the agriculturists, they were in Shahmir's grip after he had bound himself with some of their chiefs through matrimonial alliances.

The fly in the ointment presented itself in the shape of the irreligious, undependable and powerful Lavannyas, a hill tribe who still sided with the Queen. Taking this strong factor into consideration, Shahmir suffered the return of Udayanadeva back to the throne and concealed his resentment behind a facade of happy welcome to the sovereign.

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Shahmir, however, marked with satisfaction that the people did not take so happily to the return of the monarch who had deserted them in the hour of crisis. The Queen had her palace illuminated now that her lord had come. The people of the Capital did not do likewise until they were persuaded by Kumarbhatta's agents.

Kota had been interested in the return of the king not so much for her affection for or attachment to him as for her own lust for power. With Udayanadeva as ruler in name, she ruled as an autocrat, assisted in the work of administration by Bhikshana. This continued to rankle in the heart of Shahmir who justly thought himself the king-maker. That the Queen appointed his sons, Jamshed and Alisheer, on good posts and sanctioned them quick promotions, left him cold for he astutely saw in it a sop to his growing ambition. He restrained himself from making a bid for the throne for he realised that it was somewhat early to do so. He would rather wait for events to crystallise to the desired shape. As for the king, he wasted his time over wine and women, indoor games and scribbling poems.

Udayanadeva ruled on for a decade more. His dissipations had told upon his constitution and one day he died of heart failure. The Queen kept his death a secret for three days. She was mortally afraid that Shahmir would make his bid for the vacant throne. He must know that the King had died only when she felt sure of her military position inside the fort-palace and without.

Lust for power seized Kota once again. Her sons by Renchan were still with Shahmir who was at the moment stationed beyond Baramulla, far away from Srinagar. She had her son by Udayanadeva with her but she did not take the sagacious step of proclaiming the minor prince king and herself rule as his regent. Instead, she desired to rule in her own name and style. This, she knew full well, Shahmir and his increasing following among her subjects would not consent to.

She must do away with Shahmir first, she decided, when King Udayanadeva's demise became public. She called her commander of the forces and ordered him to go and arrest Shahmir. To her surprise, he showed reluctance. She ordered her bodyguard to arrest the commander but he eluded arrest. In an hour's time the army went to the side of the commander of the forces and Kota's faithful bodyguard could not withstand the large army that besieged them in the fort-palace of Srinagar. In effect, Kota became a prisoner in her own palace and the commander who had sent word to Shahmir was her gaoler.

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People stood solidly behind Shahmir in this game of the ages on the royal chess-board. They saw that Kota Rani desired power for its own sake, not for their good. Shahmir made her intentions known to the people. He used public opinion thus created in his favour as an aid to his diplomacy.

At this juncture, Kumarbhatta, one of the few ministers faithful to Kota, came to her rescue. He made secret preparations for battle at Inderkot, where he had a small army in the fort. He went to Srinagar where Shahmir held sway and Kota was imprisoned in the hill-fort.

Meeting Shahmir, he told him that it was no use to kill Kota Rani without knowing from her the secret places where her treasures lay hoarded. Shahmir took the bait and permitted Kumarbhatta to meet the jailed Queen.

The jailer of the fort read the pass given to Kumarbhatta but permitted only the holder of the pass to enter, saying, "This allows you only to enter and not your young companion".

Raising his right hand, carrying the rosary aloft in the air, Kumarbhatta replied, "You see, he carries the Puja utensils needed for the evening prayer. I want to offer the prayer with the Queen. Surely, you have no objection to that".

The duped jailer allowed the boy also to enter.

Kota changed her clothes with those of the boy and left the jail with Kumarbhatta carrying the utensils as the boy had done on entering. Nobody recognised her in the disguise.

According to Kumarbhatta's plans, Queen Kota spoke to the soldiers at Inderkot. More men joined her side though the forces in all made no impressive array. The Queen and Kumarbhatta established their headquarters at Inderkot.

Shahmir was contentedly pulling at a hookah. He mused over the dream that he had in the previous year. The sage with the white flowing beard had said to him, after blessing him, "Rise up, you man of destiny, you'll found a dynasty in Kashmir." That dream had disturbed him then, for it somewhat conflicted with his fidelity to the

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

dynasty of Raja Sahadeva whose brother Udayanadeva occupied the throne. Sahadeva had granted Shahmir a *jagir** when he came to Kashmir as a promising warrior-adventurist. But the dream haunted him and spurred his ambition. Accordingly, he had directed his actions. He had coa d the formidable Lavannyas to his side. He was on his way to realise the dream.

The train of Shahmir's thoughts was broken by the entry of his newly-appointed chief minister, who broke the news of Kota's escape and her consequent preparation for a trial of strength at Inderkot.

Shahmir was stung to the quick. His grandiose castle in the air was broken to the ground. No, it would not be. He must realise his ambition, unhindered and supreme. And, his plans were impersonal too. He aimed at revolutionising the social and political order of the country. To realise his ideal, he had evinced exemplary patience, the hallmark of genius. He had not snatched at the throne like Renchan, who also sought refuge in Kashmir like him. And, he excelled Renchan in diplomacy, courage and generalship. Having set the stage to play his cards, he was determined on the course of action. The big idea in his head must be translated into solid actions, uplifting Kashmir and Kashmiris through a sound, beneficent monarchy. His astute statecraft did not exclude ruthless measures. When Bhikshana had called on him some days earlier, he had him executed. Now Kumarbhatta and Kota were the last rocks that barred his road to the throne of Kashmir. They must be likewise liquidated, he decided.

To his minister he raged, "To hell with this Kumarbhatta who made a fool of me! I'll have my revenge. And, Kota, yes, I'll deal with her as she deserves. Had she thought of enthroning Haidar, or even her little son by Udayanadeva, I might have reacted differently. She is bent on ruling as autocrat. By Allah, she won't!".

Shahmir did what he threatened. The people of Kashmir were reluctantly divided into two camps. Shahmir had the inestimable advantage of having already captured most of the army. A man of steel nerve that he was, no revolt took place in his army, not even a hint of it. The battle with Kota's much smaller army was brief and decisive. She lost the day.

She was made prisoner and escorted to the fort under a strong guard. The people watched the drama of the monarchy with eager

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* Rent-free land.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

interest. They longed for a stable, secure monarchy that would preserve them from incursions of invaders.

According to Zonaraja, who brought Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* uptodate in the time of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, "the Queen (Kota Rani) was won by his (Shahmir's) assiduity. They married, within twenty-four hours of this nuptial, the King Shahmir caused her to be captured by the Tikshanas, and on the tenth night of bright lunar day, in the month of the Savan in the year (44) 15 the Queen dropped from her kingdom".

Persian chroniclers have footed out a different version of the death of Queen Kota. They wrote that she was married to Shahmir. In the bridal chamber, they add, she struck a dagger into her belly, uttering, "This is my acceptance". Her sons were done away with by Shahmir; there is no controversy about that event.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that Shahmir, once a refugee in Kashmir, was now the undisputed sovereign of Kashmir. Of him it was said, not without justification, that he became as much of a Kashmiri as a man could be. Some historians traced his genealogy to Arjun Pandava. He was, of course, the founder of the first Muslim dynasty of Kashmir. In 1339 A.D., the year of his accession, he assumed the title Sultan Shamas-ud-Din and coins were struck in a Muslim name for the first time in the annals of the land.

Seeing the danger to internal peace and security from the unpredictable tribe of Lavannyas, Sultan Shamas-ud-Din exterminated them. He raised a standing army of the State of Kashmir. Hard-working, self-reliant and full of ideas for the progressive development of the state, the Sultan instituted many far-reaching administrative reforms. During his regime, Islam expanded peacefully, the emphasis being laid on the persuasive methods adopted. Matrimonial alliances with the local Hindu chiefs extended his influence to the districts. Like Renchan, he too ruled the Valley for three years but had entrusted the affairs of the state to his sons before his death in 1342 A.D.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

Apricot of the Valley

The friend of the exploited cultivator, the patron of learning and culture, the Sultan most tolerant to Hindus, the pioneer of most of the arts and crafts of Kashmir, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1420-70A.D) is still fondly remembered by the people of Kashmir as *Badshah* (great monarch). The miracle of 'the apricot' is more a legend than a fact of history—but one most solemnly mentioned by English and Indian writers. That the saint Baha-ud-Din was the royal preceptor is quite a fact. He did perform many miracles, the most amazing among them being the one, recorded here, in which he makes the Sultan and Shah-i-Chin (Emperor of China) 'meet' in his humble cottage.....The story is intended to present a study of this Sultan, who lives in the memory of the folk and gentry alike rather than describe the strange incident, which nevertheless, has its own interest. Zaina Lank, Kaunsar Nag and Zaina Dab provide the variegated, picturesque background to the tale.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

6
Apricot of the Valley

A breeze was blowing over the Wular Lake — the largest fresh water lake in India — and ripples played on the surface. The Sultan and the courtiers enjoyed the lovely view of the spangled waters, the green stretches of water chestnuts in the far background, where they appeared to meet the foothills which lay under the towering snow-covered seven-peaked Haramoukh Mount.

"Sire", said Mulla Jamal, the favourite court comedian of Sultan Zian-ul-Abidin, "with the telescope of my cat's eyes, I see a big boat coming towards our blessed island. It is a 'maidenish' royal Shikara."

Everybody laughed, except the Sultan, who smiled inward. Screening his eyes, with outstretched hands, he looked in the direction beckoned by Jamal.

"You are right, always right, Jamal," said the Sultan. After a thoughtful moment, he aded, "We did not send for a royal boat. Did we, Mohammad Khan?"

Mohammad Khan, the Wazir, replied in the negative, in the formal way of address.

Wary, anxious and suspicious eyes followed the island-ward course of the Kashmir gondola.

The alert-eyed Jamal was the first to spot the occupants of the Sultan's private Shikara. "Sire, it is the Exalted Chung Ling, the goatee-bearded Ambassador of China."

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

"Oh ! that is it," the Sultan remarked.

The courtiers breathed a sigh of relief.

In a few minutes, the luxurious boat kissed Zaina Lank, the island made by Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin in the middle of the lake. The liveried boatmen chained the craft to a hook on the ghat.

The Chinese Ambassador, stroking his goatee beard, rose from the pillowed seat. Adjusting his long flowing gown, he walked towards the pavilion where the Sultan and the courtiers sat. Making scores of bows in Chinese fashion, wearing a bright smile, Chung Ling advanced gravely. The courtiers rose to receive him. The Sultan, displaying the proper smile, showed Ling to a seat near him.

Formal introductory remarks over, the Sultan, a linguist that he was, spoke to the Ambassador in Tibetan, a language that was common to them, "May we be honoured with the knowledge of the purpose of your auspicious visit to our land?"

"Sire, great Sultan", Chung Ling replied with many bows, "two years back I had the honour of meeting you and your countries in Tibet, after the victorious consummation of your expedition. I have the privilege to see the exalted Sultan once again. The Emperor of China has sent me to the beautiful Valley to ask for the tribute from your great domain which has not reached us for the last ten years".

So that was that, the Sultan thought, while the suave Ambassador went on with apologetic rigmarole. The setting sun's golden rays transformed the Wular, the fir forests rising up to Mount Haramoukh, into a thing of beauty whose image persists on the mind's canvas. In the gold over the lofty snows, the Sultan saw blood. Ling's diplomatic mission spelt trouble, his astute brain told him.

Presently, the Sultan said to the Chinese Ambassador, "Well, Chung Ling, we have heard you. We will consult with our counsellors and let you have the reply tomorrow. The sun is about to set. There you see the fisherman are returning home with their hauls. It is the hour of *nimaz*.*"

"Yes, sire", assented the Ambassador, and rose as others did. He was shown to his quarters while the Sultan went to the mosque built out of the finest black stone.

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* Muslim prayer.

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Later, in the night, the Sultan conferred with his Wazir and advisers.

They deliberated whether Kashmir should resume the yearly tribute to China.

Mohammad Khan gave his counsel: "Sire, as your Wazir and brother, I feel proud of you and what you have made of Kashmir. Kashmir now (1440 A.D.) is on the high road to progress, prosperity, expansion, not slavery or poverty. Sending tributes spells the servitude of a vassal".

Shri Bhat, the physician and a confidante of the Sultan, rejoined, "Your Majesty, I wholly agree with Wazir Mohammad Khan. Kashmir now exchanges presents with the kings of Khorasan and Turkistan, Lhasa and Tibet, and a host of small Rajas send us annual tributes. Kashmir is a mighty power".

Much the same was opined by Mulla Jamal and Mulla Ahmad, the learned scholars whose advice the Sultan valued.

Gazing at the chandelier, worked by the finest hands imported from Persia, who taught Kashmiris the arts of papier mache, wood carving, silver work, carpet-making, etc, the Sultan said, "We agree with all of you. But we sense that Shah-i-Chin has grown jealous of us and our Kashmir and all the prosperity the Valley has had for the last twenty years. His border country, Tibet, is our tributary state. How can he tolerate our hold over this buffer country? You remember how Chung talked about our conquest of Tibet? Therefore, we feel that we must send back a meet reply which though firm is not an affront at the same time".

The proper reply to China was discussed till after midnight.

Next day, after the mid-day meal, the Sultan and his courtiers sat in the *Dewan-i-Khas**. Swallows that had visited the lake with the advent of the spring raced about the spacious hall. Chung Ling was ushered in.

With bows upon bows, he expressed his appreciation of the springtime beauties of the island and the lake as he had enjoyed their view in a *Shikara* trip early in the morning.

* Special Hall of Audience.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

More formal conversation.

Coming to the point, the Sultan addressed the Ambassador in Tibetan, "To business, Ling, our friend. We extend the hand of friendship to Shah-i-Chin. We will send him presents through you. We wish your great empire prosperity and renown."

The Ambassador's face lengthened a little when he heard nothing of the tribute — the object of his errand. Disguising his emotion, he bowed his understanding of the message.

Later in the day, Chung Ling left in a royal boat, rowed by many boatmen loaded with Kashmir carpets, shawls, fancy articles, made of wood and others worked with papier mache, silver and gold smithy.

Two months passed. Summer followed spring. As it grew rather hot in Srinagar, the Sultan moved to Kaunsar Nag, a glorious mountain lake, about two miles long, situated at a height of more than twelve thousand feet, cupped among perennial, encircling snows of mountain peaks. By the side of sapphire-blue water lake, the Sultan and his few courtiers dwelt in a rest house.

One day the Sultan cruised the lake in a boat that was designed after Noah's Ark. A Kashmiri musician sang Persian verse, being the translation of Sanskrit poetry into Persian by Zona Raja. A courtier waved a yellow flag on the shore. Mulla Ahmad saw the signal and without disturbing the music of the *Rabab*, he signed to the head boatman to paddle towards the shore. Manoeuvring the craft among weeds, the boatman obeyed.

Chill winds whipped the Sultan and his three courtiers as they stepped up the ghat.

The courtier unfastened his sling-bag and produced a sealed parchment from the Wazir. Respectfully, he presented it to the King.

The parchment hailed from China, the courtiers understood from its exterior. The Sultan unfurled the long document rolled over two sticks. The epistle was written in Chinese as well as in Tibetan, for his convenience.

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He read it. A frown knit his eyebrows. He read it again, looked about and then said to Shri Bhat, Mulla Ahmad and Mulla Jamal, "The letter is an ultimatum from Shah-i-Chin who has been enraged for not having received tribute from us. We were expecting this. It amounts to a declaration of war by Chin on Kashmir."

They talked on, excited and flurried, making preparations for speedy return to the Capital.

Srinagar saw Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin back in his famous palace, Zain Dab, much earlier than the scheduled programme. The citizens were disappointed as they lost the opportunity of welcoming the Sultan back to the capital in the usual royal boat procession down the Jhelum to the ghat near the newly-built bridge, Zaina Kadal.

The Sultan was received by Mohammad Khan. They were immediately closeted in a cabinet.

"We received the letters you sent", began the Sultan. "Presently we have to wage war against a great power but we are prepared. Though for the last seven years we have not fought a battle, our armed forces are in trim. Kashmir is prosperous, every inch of it, thanks to the new canals, introduction of fruit trees, arts and crafts and the able administration carried on by you and our loyal and efficient collectors".

"Sire", rejoined Mohammad Khan, "all this is due to your personality, your unflagging interest in the affairs of the State, the inspiration that we have from you. Grateful subjects fitly call you *Badshah* (great emperor). They sing folk-songs in your name..."

"Stop that praise", interrupted the Sultan.

"What I mean to, say, sire, is that before every expedition we used to seek blessings of one of the many sages that Kashmir fortunately has. Let us tell them that we have drafted the declaration of war".

"You are a wise Wazir", agreed the Sultan. "You have expressed what was on our tongue. Yes, we will see our preceptor, Hazrat Baha-ud-Din. Come on".

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The dead of the night found the royal brothers in the humble cottage of Baha-ud-Din, the hollow-cheeked, lean, ill-clad *Faqir* who had prophesied to the Sultan twenty years back, "You will be a great Sultan. In you lifetime your people will worship you as *Badshah*." He had refused the Sultan's invitations to banquets and river processions, always saying, "I am right where I am. A naked *faqir* has nothing to do with your big affairs". Nevertheless, the Sultan secretly repaired to his slum home, sent him presents and profited from his discourses.

In the light of the small earthen lamp, the *Faqir* saw the entrants. He addressed them forthwith! : "Chicken that you are ! Badshah afraid of Shah-i-Chin ! Ha! Ha!" He laughed at them derisively.

The Sultan wasn't surprised at Baha-ud-Din's feat of clairvoyance. He knew that the *Faqir* would speak so. Bowing low, he prepared to sit.

"Sit near us on this prayer carpet, Sultan. You are accustomed to a throne. This is our throne. Share it".

"But Hazrat ....."

"Hazrat knows every little throb of your royal heart", said the *Faqir*, still telling the beads under his *pheran*. "Have patience, my Sultan..."

To their amazement, the Sultan and his Wazir saw a void where the *Faqir* was.

The light flickered a little. There was a mysterious rustle in the air. They were left alone. Where was the saint? They did not talk...

In his gorgeous bedroom, Shah-i-Chin slept soundly on the raised couch.

He heard a voice, a strange foreigner's voice, speaking Chinese, calling him. He woke up with a start. Near his bed, under the China clay statuette of Confucius, he saw a striking figure. The figure appeared like an apparition. Yet it was a man, a Kashmiri perhaps, telling beads in a hand, raised aloft.

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The man spoke, in broken Chinese, "Get up, Shah-i-Chin and entertain the Ambassador of Kashmir."

"You? Here? At this time ?" said the Emperor of China, in anger, "How did you find admittance ? I shall call..."

"Don't shout, Shah", said Baha-ud-Din. "Don't wake up your queen or your men".

The Emperor, held by the power of the *Faqir's* voice and eyes, obeyed meekly.

"I invite you to the beautiful Valley of Kashmir."

"How ?" said the amazed Emperor

"Shut your eyes", commanded Baha-ud-Din...

The oil lamp quivered again in the room of the *Faqir* where sat the Sultan of Kashmir and his brother, still alert, still quiet.

The light increased somewhat. Another rustle.

Out of nowhere, they saw the saint appear in his corner along with a Chinese dressed in bed-clothes, mantled by an exquisitely worked gown. Baha-ud-Din and a distinguished Chinese! They rubbed their unbelieving eyes and saw the pair confronting them. The visitors talked. They were in flesh and blood.

"Hazrat, what is this?" addressed the Sultan to Baha-ud-Din with folded hands. He understood that Shah-i-Chin was before him in person, sharing a strip of the carpet with him.

"Shake hands, emperors," spoke Baha-ud-Din in Tibetan, the language that he knew both of them understood.

The dazed emperors shook hands, making polite remarks of introduction.

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Sweat covered the body of Mohammad Khan, who saw the drama of the miracle in a dreamy haze.

"Be friends, emperors," again spoke the *Faqir*. "You are brothers. Brothers don't quarrel. They love each other".

"Yes, Hazrat", said the emperors, almost simultaneously.

"Brother-kings exchange presents. They do not demand each other's tributes. So what do you say, Shah-i-Chin?"

"Hazrat, I agree with you", the Emperor of China made meek reply. "I was wrong. I was jealous of Kashmir's rising prosperity. We are impressed that Kashmir has a great monarch and a saint like you. In future, we will exchange presents with Kashmir."

"That is good," said the *Faqir*. "I bless you, Shah-i-Chin, you will live long. Here is our present to you and to Chin. With that we wish you godspeed."

The saint handed him a dozen apricots. Shah-i-Chin rose, bowed and disappeared.

"Hazrat, I did not expect this. I had come to have your blessings to the declaration of war against Chin."

"Close that chapter, Sultan" said Baha-ud-Din in admonishing tones. "Go your kingly way and rest your army. Well, now, we must meditate now".

The Sultan, followed by his brother, left...

Next day, the Emperor of China called his court earlier than usual.

To the courtiers he announced: "Listen, we have decided to call off preparations for war against Kashmir."

"Why, sire?" they protested unanimously.

"We had been to Kashmir during the night. Kashmir is a great country".

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"What, sire? Can that be true?" "Sire, Your Majesty had a dream!" and so on, came the comments.

To a mystified audience, the Emperor related the experience of the night.

As doubts still were writ large on their faces, the Emperor added, "Here are Kashmir apricots, the ones that Kashmir alone has in the world. The great *Faqir* gave us twelve. The Queen has had one. Eleven are left. We'll share them. How many are we ?"

He looked round and counted. They were eleven in all, ELEVEN!

The apricots were distributed, eaten.

"Truly, these are Kashmir apricots", commented Chung Ling. "How sweet!"

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'Nothing but Kashmir'

Moghul rule came as a boon to the erstwhile un-Happy Valley, in 1586 A.D. Moghuls gave peace and prosperity to the country. Akbar built the fort of Hari Parbat, and walled it round. Jahangir loved the Valley still more. He and his consort, Nur Jehan, laid excellent, terraced gardens at Verinag, Achabal, Nasseem Bagh, Shalimar, Manasbal, etc. The royal romantic couple had the stately tree, Chinar, planted throughout the 'Vale'. Nur Jehan built the Pathar Masjid in the heart of Srinagar — which became the Hq. of the Kashmir National Conference in the 40s of this century.

The scene opens in Verinag, the favourite residence of Jahangir and Nur Jehan, which was enclosed by the Emperor in a stone octagon and spanned by a picturesque Moghul building. The story describes the last — fourth visit of the Emperor during 1626-27 A.D. Also, it lays bare a comprehensive review of the period. The visit culminated in the fatal stag episode....

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

7

Nothing but Kashmir

"Don't you like this painting, Dilawar Khan ?" said the Emperor, pointing to the full-size portrait of Akbar.

"Sire, it is grand", agreed Dilawar Khan, the ex-governor of Kashmir.

"We visualise that Akbar the Great, our father of revered memory, has come back to life, when we see this," musingly observed Jahangir Shah, the Great Moghul. "And here is Humayun", beckoning the other paintings in the famous Picture Gallery of Kashmir, " this is Shah Abbas, the Sultan of Persia. These of smaller size are the princes of the Moghul family. The Moghul Empire — how long will it last? Well, look out of the window. The Verinag looks beautiful".

"Magnificant as ever, sire," rejoined Raja Man Singh.

They commanded a fine view of the largest spring of Kashmir, Verinag, the source of the Jhelum, whose circumference of one hundred and eleven feet was enclosed within the structures built by Jahangir ever since he had been the heir-apparent to the Moghul throne. Fishes of all sizes played in its fifty and odd feet depth of intensely blue water. The water gurgled over the many waterfalls, feeding the fountains that flashed symmetrical designs of water spray in the air. Flower beds dotted the velvety green sward. Nestling under the encircling forest-clad mountains, the garden appeared elysian indeed.

After a while, Jahangir, swallowing a pill of opium, added, "This garden is our child. We love it with all our heart. For the fourth time, Delhi calls us away from this gem of the mountains. We have to go,

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much against our will. Allah knows when we shall return to this spring-garden. We may never return; who knows?"

"Sire, what does Your Majesty say?" said the courtiers, almost in a chorus.

"Well, well, are the elephants and horses ready?" the Emperor questioned the head grooms, changing the subject.

"Yes, sire," replied the man bowing, nearly falling at the Emperor's feet.

Awarding presents to the gardeners and other staff of Verinag, and giving directions to an engineer for alternations and additions to the garden structures, Jahangir reviewed the retinue. Going towards the Queen's elephant, he saw that she was already mounted. The mahout placed the ladder against the side of the elephant. The Emperor climbed the howdah.

Nur Jehan unveiled herself within the curtained howdah, and addressed her royal consort, "Sire, your eyes are tear-moist ?"

"Yes, darling, we are loath to leave Verinag."

"The affairs of the State are more pressing than the personal needs of a holiday in a loved garden of a loved land".

"You are right, my queen," remarked the Emperor, with a sigh.

"Now, we must start".

Jahangir Shah dismounted from the elephant, then rode his own. The procession started amidst the crowds of Kashmiri villagers. Women sang folk songs, addressed to the Emperor. He was sung as the "Fount of Justice", who had a Mulla executed for he had ravished a Hindu girl; who himself gave succour to Kashmiris in the Great Fire of Srinagar, who saved downtrodden Kashmiris from plague, cholera and famine, who, they prayed in sweet chorus, would live till Doomsday to make Kashmir more and more prosperous. The royal interpreter translated the songs to the Emperor who looked out towards Nur Jehan's elephant and waved his hand. She understood the sign

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

and threw the peasant women bags of coins. Tears beaded the eyes of the peasants as the cavalcade passed out of sight, down the sloping road.

On the next day, the caravan neared the famous saffron field of Pampore. Saffron was in blossom. A patch of the stretches of the picturesque fields came in sight. By the roadside, a Kashmiri girl stepped out of a group of children. She carried a bunch of saffron flowers in her hand. She made a nervous sign of offering it to the Emperor when the big elephant, whose presence awed her, approached her.

Jahangir bade the mahout stop the elephant. Receiving the hint of a goad, the elephant crouched down, Jahangir beckoned the girl, dressed in a rustic *puttoo pheran,* to draw near. Adjusting a tousled curl, she stepped forward and shyly presented the bunch of saffron flowers.

Dilawar Khan, Raja Man Singh, a mulla and others, who rode horses, gathered round. The Emperor addressed them, "The fair daughter of Kashmir has presented us saffron flowers. Can there be a lovelier gift? Raja, give the girl a *mohur.** Oh these lovely flowers ! We don't want to part company from them. This land of blossoms is the Heaven on the earth that hath no parallel. Truly, this is 'Eden of the East', as we have repeated so often in our *Tuzak.*"

The royal caravan passed by the saffron fields. Occasionally, as his wont was, the Emperor took down notes for his *Tuzak.* Wherever the eye went, one saw the earth-kissing pink blossom. The view enthralled him. Peasants, men and women, were picking the flowers. They sang folk-songs, a few in praise of the saffron flowers, others recapitulating the glorious reign of 'Badshah' and still others sung in the Emperor's praise by the rustic Muse. The interpreter again translated the songs of the people.

"What do the people get for this labour of picking the flowers?" Jahangir asked him.

"Saviour of the World", replied the interpreter, bowing, "they receive the weight of the saffron flowers picked by them in common salt".

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* A Gold coin. His memoirs.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

"Oh! we see", observed the Emperor, as the caravan proceeded, between the rich saffron fields. "That is why these Kashmiris are so pale. Their faces show they do not eat much salt. Otherwise, we and the governors have done what we could to ameliorate their lot".

"Sire", said Dilawar Khan, "they gratefully sing Your Majesty's praises!"

"Remind us, when me meet the Governor, so that we may arrange more supplies of common salt for these simple, honest, long-suffering folk."

"Yes, sire".

The procession reached Srinagar where a right royal reception was accorded to the Emperor by the citizens who had made preparations for days.

Jahangir Shah went down the City in a river procession. The gaily decked *Paranda* * was cheered by the people from the arrayed ghats and adorned riverside houses. The boat procession swerved from the Jhelum towards the Dal Lake. The Emperor stayed in the lake view palace of Dilawar Khan, made in the middle of the famous garden that he had made when he was the Governor of Kashmir. The present Governor, Ittiqad Khan, was the host.

On the morning of the following day, the Emperor and Nur Jahan, accompanied by their personal staff, went for boating to the Dal lake, in a royal *shikara* manned by seventeen sturdy Hanjis. Again and again, Jahangir sang praises of the lovely lake reflecting in its calm and limpid waters, towering craggy mountains and the willows lining the banks and the fishermen's boats dotting the 'Big Dal'**.

In the afternoon, the Emperor and his retinue resumed their journey to Delhi. The night was spent in the royal *Serai* at Shopian.

The ascent of the Pir Panchal was started on the next day in the small hours.

Snow that had fallen in the night spread a thin blanket over the track which grew steep as they advanced. Jahangir had to dismount from his elephant. So did Nur Jahan. They rode horses instead.

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* A barge boat, rowed by many hands, used on ceremonial occasions.

** The bigger part of the Dal Lake.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

Pallor had spread over Jahangir's face since the morning. Was the previous month's severe illness again making its appearance?

To Nur Jahan's questions as to how he was feeling, he replied, "We are not feeling very well. We will be well soon if Allah desires our health. Pass us a cup of wine. Oh Allah! this dirty pathway. This is the only blot on this 'Heaven of the Earth': the road to it is so difficult and dangerous."

"Saviour of the World, but for the *Serais*", said a groom "built by Your Majesty, we would have to face great odds. We lost only one elephant and ten horses, which is small as compared with previous huge losses. We will soon reach Bahram Galli".

Driving sleet choked the voice of the groom. With benumbed hands, he clutched the bridle of the Emperor's horse and prevented it from slipping dangerously over the dizzying ravine that flanked the narrow path. Pine trees and the sturdy shoulders of the mountains were already mantled with snow. From somewhere they heard the resounding roar of a leopard.

"We feel like hunting", the Emperor expressed the wish. "We must carry a few more heads of leopards and deer".

"Yes, sire, if you feel well", said the Queen, suspicious that the new flow of energy wasn't to be trusted.

The *Serai* of Bahram Galli could be seen from a distance in the spacious mountain meadow. Jahangir smiled to see the imposing structure whose site he had himself selected. On the northward, a steep copse provided a contrasting relief to the view.

The keeper of the *Serai* and many servants and mountain-folk welcomed the Emperor. The sky was clearing. Blue patches struggling with the clouds looked so pure and beautiful. The sun shone bright and dazzling.

"Lovely!" exclaimed the Emperor in spontaneous jubilation. "Our heart is well pleased. We forget out illness in this majesty of nature. Queen, go to your quarters. We will hunt awhile."

"But, sire...", she protested.

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"Our darling, there is no room for anxiety. We are perfectly all right. We will come back soon."

The Emperor rode his charger. Man Singh and Dilawar Khan followed...

Above, in the thick of the jungle, a mountaineer, namely Habib Khan, returned home with a load of firewood. He hastened his steps for he desired to pass through Bahram Galli and see the Great Moghul Emperor and his grand camp. He heard unusual squeaky cries. On the alert in mountaineer fashion, he told the sound. A deer!

Leaving the path, he made towards the spot. To his (happy) surprise, he saw a tall, fine stag exerting to free its leg from the netting of a shrub. Easy deer-stalking, Habib Khan told himself, as he untied the bundle of wood for the rope.

Softly, he went near the struggling stag, made a noose of the rope and threw it round the neck. The rope had to be pulled down the large, spreading antlers. The stag attacked him in desperation. He gave a blow on the head of the deer. That pacified the stag for some time. With his belt-axe, he cut the roots and creeping twigs, and extricated the leg of the captive deer.

An idea struck Habib Khan — a grand idea! He would present the beautiful stag alive to the Great Moghul. Emperor Jahangir would reward him. That would help.

Habib Khan dragged the reluctant deer after him. He reached a precipitous slope, wherefrom he would take a short cut down to the meadow *Serai* of Bahram Galli. Pulling at the rope, he walked wary steps. In the staggering distance, he saw several men, standing near horses, looking up. Was the tall one, gorgeously dressed, the Emperor? He was !

But, suddenly, Habib Khan found that the deer stood firm as a rock and would not move. Habib Khan pulled hard at the rope. The tall, big stag budged not an rich. He pulled again, harder. No effect. The stockstill stag stared at him, from the slopy ascent. He tugged again, harder this time. The taut rope snapped. He lost his footing, and fell, down and down...

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

Jahangir and his courtiers had observed the drama of the man and the stag, from the meadow. They saw the sturdy mountaineer pulling at the rope, tied to a big deer. A *mulla* understood the nature of the errand of the man and said so to the company. With added interest, and bated breath, the Emperor followed the steep course of the mountaineer.

The mountaineer stopped, appeared to tug at the rope. And then— he slipped and fell. The poor man rolled, with increasing acceleration, down the precipice of a slope, uttering piercing shrieks. After a time, the agonised cries stopped but nothing would stop the downward falling of the body.

A terrible sight for the Emperor and courtiers!

Jahangir exclaimed, "Allah! Allah! save the poor mountaineer".

Nothing helped the doomed man. A limb — was it an arm? — was torn asunder from the already dead body and thrown aloft in the sky. What a horrifying sight! The turban was flung likewise and caught in briars. The clothes were torn into rags and tatters. A hideous mass of flesh and blood and rags rolled down and down, at an increasing speed, till it came to a dead stop near the Emperor, on the plain ground.

Jahangir was aghast. An unbearable nausea overtook him. He reeled and was about to fall when an attendant held him. "What a sight we have seen! Terrible!" he said in broken words.

The courtiers marked the change in his face, livid with sickness. They set him on his steed, and conducted him to the camp.

The *Hakim** felt the Emperor's pulse and pronounced him dangerously ill. Not many medicines were to be had in the mountain *Serai*. The Queen, practical as ever, decided at once to move to Rajouri, a hill town, several miles ahead.

It was late afternoon. The Emperor's elephant was moved with extra care. He talked in delirium. "What a gruesome sight we saw! ... A bad omen! ..." Nur Jahan, holding his hand, and, touching his forehead, entreated him to forget the episode.

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* Physician.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

Rajouri was reached, late in the evening.

The Emperor's condition deteriorated considerably till it grew serious. In the big room of the Zaildar's house, Jahangir looked about. Death was written on his eyes, his visage.

"What will you have, 'Shelter of the World'?" his Queen asked him.

"Only Kashmir, I want nothing but Kashmir". These were the *last* words of Jahangir, the Moghul lover of the 'Vale of Cashmere'.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

Hero of Nishat Bagh

Emperor Shah Jahan, the great builder of the Taj Mahal and celebrated for his Peacock Throne, was no less a lover of Kashmir than his father, with whom he had visited the Valley once. There arose rivalry between Shah Jahan and his minister, Asaf Khan, in 1634. The apple of discord was Nishat Bagh (Pleasure Garden), the finest and biggest Moghul garden in Kashmir, overlooking the Dal Lake, that has won praises from writers and tourists of the world. The conflict made the Grand Moghul to turn his attention to the prettier garden of Shalimar (Abode of Love), 3 km further from Nishat, nestling at the foot of Mount Mahadev. (Later, he laid the garden called Chashma Shahi—King's Spring — within a nook of the foothills of Zabarwan). Some one *saves* the Nishat; he is the hero. There is a heroine too...

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

8

Hero of Nishat Bagh

"Tomorrow the Emperor Shah Jahan will pay a visit to our garden", said Asaf Ali to his valet, Jaffar, who was attending to his *hookah*. "You must have all the arrangements for dance and wine completed today. The uppermost terrace of our garden is to be occupied".

"Yes, Your Highness", said Jaffar, bowing. "I shall do my best. The Emperor has granted pardon to me. Of course, they would not have done so had not Your Highness intervened for me."

"Do not remind us of your unhappy days when you served a king who was against Moghuls. You were misplaced there even as a pearl is on the bed of a sea. It is good that we delved you out. You are gold among our household staff. We are proud of you. Now go and buck up the gardeners. Every fountain must play well tomorrow. Every flower must look its best. The Emperor must admire our Nishat Bagh, our treasure, our soul, which it is. Why don't you go? Don't make us talk much".

Jaffar, bowing low, took three paces backwards and left.

Asaf Ali enjoyed his *hookah*. Sitting in the central pavilion of Nishat Bagh, he commanded the best view of the sloping green terraces of the Bagh leading down to the resplendent Dal Lake, the fort-clad Hari Parbat hill and the temple-topped Shankaracharya silhouetted in the background. He was lost in contemplation of the numerous *Shikaras* and *Doonga* boats dotting the scintillated expanse of the Dal Lake, the graceful willows lining its swardy banks and the sinuous bund that spanned its breadth. The stretches of lotus leaves and flowers soothed his eye and calmed his soul. Who should be the dancer at the banquet to the Emperor, he thought ?

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Presently a swallow crossed the room. Its graceful flitting form was for a moment sharply outlined against the gorgeous, papier machie designs of the frescoed walls. The swallow stirred Asaf Ali's imagination. The dancer must possess the grace of a swallow, he decided. Her movements must be as quick and artfully impetuous as that of the swallow, and her poise must have equal stability of stature. Who corresponded to the description? Let me think, he said to himself, as he pulled hard at the *hookah*. Yes, the idea came; none but Malti had the swallow's grace. She would dance. She would be dressed as a Rajput queen and would dazzle the Emperor just as the Nishat would.

Malti, a young, graceful Rajput girl, came of a noble family that had come upon evil days. She was a blonde beauty. Her eyes had an exotic magic in them that charmed everybody. She, it was rumoured, had a soft corner for the sturdy Pathan youth, Jaffar, who, like her, claimed a high descent. The women of Asaf Ali's harem jealously regarded Malti for they feared she would be added to the harem by their lord. Asaf Ali admired her form and figure and liked her for her intelligence. But once he heard that Jaffar had his eye on her, he, having great regard for Jaffar, paid no more attention to her. He marked one thing with satisfaction — that she and Jaffar were more interested in the upkeep of the Nishat Bagh than his own sons and daughters or others of his big household.

The uppermost terrace of the Nishat Bagh commanded a panoramic view of the Dal Lake. It was royally furnished for the reception of the Emperor. The Emperor, attended by his courtiers and his daughter, Jahan Ara, arrived at the gaily decorated *Ghat* of the Nishat Bagh, one hour later than the scheduled time.

Descending from the royal *Doonga* boat and stepping on the *Ghat*, he said to Asaf Ali, in reply to his courteous welcome, "It is our privilege to visit your beautiful Nishat Bagh. We have heard great praises of your Nishat. Our Shalimar Bagh is not yet complete, we have been told".

Asaf Ali, the maker of Nishat Bagh, was justly proud of it. But he did not want to show it, least so before an Emperor who loved such things of beauty and who had already got Shalimar Bagh planned and laid as a rival to Nishat Bagh. Making a slight obeisance, as the Emperor went up the steps, he said "Your Majesty, the Bagh can't hold a candle to the magnificent Shalimar Bagh".

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The Emperor, on his part was taken aback by the first look of Nishat Bagh. He had never imagined it to be so beautiful as he found it now. Therefore he mistook Asaf Ali's remark as ironical, drawing a subtle comparison between Nishat and Shalimar Baghs. He was almost insulted and therefore made no reply. But an Emperor does not forget insults.

The banquet was laid in the uppermost terrace of the Bagh. It was about sunset. The Emperor was thrilled at the most beautiful sunset he had ever seen in his life. The red glow of the clouds above the distant mountains of the Himalayan range, concealing the imperious heights of Nanga Parbat, was gorgeously reflected in the sparkling level sheet of the so-called Big Dal, containing the four-Chinar island. Clutching his cup of wine, the Emperor remarked, casually, "Asaf Ali, your Bagh commands the most beautiful view of the Dal Lake. These lovely fountains, these sparkling waterfalls, the gorgeous pavilions and the marvellous beauty of the Dal with such a sunset over it. Oh! we could write a poem on it".

"I feel flattered, Your Majesty", replied Asaf Ali, biting his lip. "This Bagh is the work of your humble servant, whom you have made the governor of this land of enchantment and beauty. But for Jaffar, whose life was graciously spared by Your Majesty, I could not keep this Bagh in this condition."

Beckoning Jaffar with the long stem of his *hookah*, the Emperor said, slightly raising his eyebrows, "Jaffar, under his former Afghan master, was a traitor against us when that Afghan was so shameless as to dare to rise against a Moghul Emperor. You asked for his life. Be mindful, Asaf Ali, of his Pathan blood. We hope he serves you well".

"Yes Your Majesty. He is very faithful. I am very proud of him".

After the banquet, the Emperor retired to his garden, Shalimar Bagh. The Bagh, he desired, must excel all gardens in India in point of art and architecture. It was about to be completed. Hundreds of skilled workmen laboured long and arduously at the Bagh. The Emperor admired their work and rewarded them. But he was unhappy, as Jahan Ara intuitively guessed, as they had a ramble one evening round the garden.

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"*Qibla Alam*, what can ail you ?" she pleadingly asked him.

After some moments, Shah Jahan answered her, "Don't you see, my darling child ? We must possess Nishat Bagh. We broadly hinted Asaf Ali that he ought to make a present of his Bagh to us. He understands, but these seven days he has not done what we want him to do. No, no, he won't."

Jahan Ara, who loved her father more than anyone else in the world, read the tone of anguish in his words. She found herself saying, "Compose yourself, *Qibla Alam* .* Asaf Ali will obey your wishes. He dare not do otherwise."

Despair gave way to determination and iron-willed jealousy, when the Emperor said, "Asaf Ali's Bagh will not look beautiful any longer. Our canal feeds his garden. We will have it closed just now". The Emperor beckoned a *mali* and gave him the command.

The life line of Nishat Bagh was cut off. Jaffar and Malti, who had been married a few days back in the very garden, were the first to find the stream drying up. They were shocked and ran to Asaf Ali with the news. He said simply, "The Emperor is jealous of this Bagh. I averted his overtures to possess this garden. Nishat is my life. I cannot part with it. Let him dry it".

Tears welled in Malti's eyes. Nor could Jaffar, whose honeymoon was blighted by this, bear his master's sorrow.

Nishat bagh started losing its fresh, green colour. Flowers faded away. Flower-beds looked so many brown patches over the sward that was drying. The leaves of Chinar and fruit saplings changed colour. Singing birds migrated from the Bagh. Not hearing their sweet choir in the mornings any more, Asaf Ali dreamily puffed at his *hookah*. He was usually depressed and from the window of his lofty pavilion he would look away from his Bagh towards the Dal Lake. Many boats and barges, he saw, were crossing the Dal diagonally, towards the Shalimar Bagh.

Jaffar fed his *hookah* and said, "Master, I cannot tolerate this any

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* 'Lord of the world' — an expression of regard.

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longer. Those barges are carrying Rajputana marbles to Shalimar to make that Bagh more and more beautiful, whereas our Bagh has lost its splendid green look. The Emperor is unjust. He is ...."

Asaf Ali stopped him firmly but speaking low, in tremulous whispers: "Jaffar, do not speak against the Emperor. Now leave us alone".

Jaffar left. He was beside himself with rage and thwarted ambition. He went to his quarters at the corner of the Bagh. He picked up a drooping daisy on the way and, seeing Malti, who had finished her cooking, he spoke vehemently, "Look Malti! Look at this daisy. How long will these flowers fade like this? How long will our master suffer? No, it cannot go on for long".

Malti took the daisy from his hands and stroked it with her pale, nimble fingers. Helplessly, she said, "But what can we do? The Emperor has his will. Our master must have his. Why should our master part with this treasure which he has made with his sweat and blood?"

"No, he will not give it away. I shall water the Bagh tonight though I may die in the attempt".

"Jaffar dear, that is madness. How can that be done ? Even if you water the Bagh for some time, the Emperor can again divert the water back. He will kill you. It's no use."

"Don't say, Malti, it's no use. Even if it be for a night only I must water the Nishat. It is our very life. We are starving. We must quench our thirst. My Pathan sense is awake to the necessity. I must. I must."

He embraced her passionately and they were silent for a long time.

Next morning, Asaf Ali as usual pulled sullenly at his *hookah* What did he hear? Bulbuls, woodcocks, tits, woodpeckers, golden orioles and swallows were gaily singing in the garden. Sparrows and mynas were twittering. There were more crows flying about. The fresh scent of newly-opened flowers refreshed him. What could it mean? He looked out towards the Bagh. And, lo! the fountains were beautifully

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playing. The sun, risen high behind the craggy mountain, cast oblique rays making the dew shine marvellously. A knot of gardeners was working. Who was the head *mali* ? Asaf Ali clapped his hands and a servant came in. "Call the head *mali* here", he ordered.

The servant returned with Jaffar, who was bespattered with mud all over and dressed as a Kashmiri coolie. Both of them bowed low before Asaf Ali while the servant said, looking down at the floor, "Sir, the head *mali* was not there. Jaffar was at the head of the assistant *malis*".

The servant retired.

"Has the Emperor given us water after all? We are so happy. The Emperor, I told you, is noble and just, even as his revered father was".

"*Qibla*", Jaffar said, bowing, "I have diverted the water last night. I could not see the Nishat withering any longer".

"You, you ! What have you done?" angrily shouted Asaf Ali "The Emperor is already angry with us. Allah only knows what he will do now".

The gate-keeper came not in quite the usual, long-drawn, formal way, but he looked nervous and said, after a short bow, "The Emperor has sent his carriage and wants to see *Qibla* without any delay".

Asaf Ali only said, "So that is it, Jaffar," threw away the pipe of the *hookah* and put on his embroidered overall and his big turban. He came down the stairs in haste while Jaffar and servants followed. The carriage and four left post haste for the Shalimar Bagh.

Shah Jahan, the Emperor, sat in state on the stone pavilion of Shalimar Bagh. The usher announced Asaf Ali and he took his seat after paying respects. Jahan Ara sat on the right of the Emperor. She twitched her lips as Asaf Ali sat down and looked uneasy. Asaf Ali understood that something was wrong.

After a few words about the climate and the finishing touches being given to the Shalimar, Shah Jahan said abruptly, "Asaf Ali, may we know how you have diverted the water of the canal without our

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permission as, lately, we had appropriated the whole water for our Bagh ?"

Asaf Ali hung his head a little, as he could not quite stand the stern gaze of the Emperor, who was fuming with rage.

"Your Majesty, one of my servants..."

The usher interrupted him, as he announced Jaffar, who, he said, urgently sought audience with the Emperor and Asaf Ali.

"Let him come," said the Emperor, without lifting his fixed gaze from Asaf Ali.

Jaffar had changed his clothes. He was dressed like a courtier and, indeed, he looked very handsome. Bowing courteously, he said straightaway, "Your Majesty, I know why my master has been called. I have come to confess that my master knows nothing of how the water was diverted to Nishat Bagh since I did that last night."

"You !" thundered Shah Jahan in righteous, imperial indignation. "You Jaffar ! You scoundrel. You have once again stood against us. I knew your Pathan blood would boil again. Now you won't be spared. No Asaf Ali will speak for you now". After a pause, he added: "Usher, call in three sepoys and have Jaffar bound hand and foot just now and also command the executioner to make ready."

Jaffar, nonchalant and calm, stood there as a statue and said formally, but slowly, " I plead guilty, Your Majesty. I am not afraid to die — least so for the Nishat which is my life-blood".

"You shut that dog's mouth," raged the Emperor, clenching his fists, his words coming out between his teeth. "You should have died much earlier".

To the sepoys, as they came, the Emperor ordered, "Tie this wily Pathan to that Chinar till the executioner comes. No, not to the Chinar. It is yet young. To the mulberry tree which is as crooked as this ungrateful rogue."

The usher made his appearance, as Jaffar was bound by the sepoys

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and said, "Your Majesty, a woman calling herself Malti, begs admittance to the royal presence".

"Who is Malti, Asaf Ali?" asked the Emperor, half in anger. Asaf Ali, still downcast, replied, "Sire, Malti is Jaffar's wife".

"Is she ? So this roguish Pathan married your best Rajput dancer, Asaf Ali," and then to the usher, "Let her in".

Charming, tall, unconscious of the heart-throbbing effect of her person, Malti made a low bow and looking at Jaffar, bound to the tree and double handcuffed, she was taken aback for a moment. Her presence somehow even made the Emperor silent for the time being. Everybody looked at her, as she dramatically addressed the Emperor. "Sire. Your Majesty represents justice. Allow me to plead that I was with Jaffar when he diverted the canal to the Nishat".

"So you are birds of the same feather ?" fumed the Emperor. "The Pathan's rebellious blood has stirred your Rajputani blood too. You also will suffer. Death will be your honeymoon. Sepoys, take her prisoner. Is the executioner not come ?"

The sepoys, bowing smartly and respectfully, pointed out the executioner, who stood at a distance, wielding his heavy sword over his bare, muscular shoulder. The Emperor beckoned him to come near and commanded, "Behead the two prisoners just now so that our subjects take a lesson and know what it means to flout our will which is law in every inch of the Moghul Empire".

As the executioner and sepoys conducted Malti towards Jaffar a courtier intervened, standing up and, after bowing several times, said, "Sire, permit me to speak".

"The prisoners are to die. It is meet that according to the accepted practice we ask them their last wishes", he added.

"Yes do", allowed the Emperor, curtly.

The courtier, on behalf of the Emperor, said to Jaffar, "Jaffar, according to the law of the land, we ask you whether you have any dying wish".

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Disregarding him, Jaffar addressed the Emperor, "Sire, shall my last wish be granted, whatever it is ?"

The Emperor did not like this impudence but he did reply, laconically, "A Moghul King observes what he says".

Jaffar who was unbounded from the tree, bowed and said, "Sire, my last wish is that Nishat Bagh should forever receive water supply as it used to."

He had hardly finished when Malti too addressed the Emperor "Sire, I know, I also shall be asked my last wish. I hasten to add that my last wish is exactly the same, that our Nishat must never be dried."

Jaffar's lofty manner and Malti's touching grace added to the dramatic effect of their dying wishes upon the Emperor, Asaf Ali, the courtiers and others. All of them were dumbfounded. For a time no one spoke. The Emperor, his rage obviously melted, broke the silence with "Bravo, Jaffar, you are so noble, loyal and heroic. We will not go back upon our word. Your wish is granted. And yours too, Malti. Nishat Bagh will have water for ever. You two have opened our eyes".

After a while, the Emperor addressed Asaf Ali; "Asaf Ali, don't look away from us. Look at us. You are fortunate to have such servants. They are so faithful to you. Their fidelity has touched us. We pardon them. They will not die. Such jewels must not die. We command" — beckoning the sepoys — "free the prisoners".

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Pir Pandit Padshah

The most remarkable thing about miracles is that they do sometimes happen.

G.K. Chesterton

In the life of the saint, called Pir Pandit Padshah, miracles happened many times, rather, were made to happen. These miracles are not gleaned from any legend. These are a part of the history of the Valley on the lips of Hindus and Muslims. No one disbelieves them. In India, the land of mystics and occultists, these feats happen still, though few and far between.

Even the puritan Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb, whose long sway over Kashmir lasted from 1659 to 1707 A.D., recognised the powers of the Hindu Pir and conferred a high title on him. To know as to in what circumstances the Emperor did so, is very interesting to the visitor to and lover of the Happy Valley. Every Kashmiri knows this part of the story, having heard it at the feet of the grandma some day, in his or her childhood..

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9

Pir Pandit Padshah

Rumour ran wild in the city of Srinagar, as it always does. Everybody asked everybody else, "Have you heard? Mulla Akhun Shah transports a most comely girl from Lahore every night." The newsmonger added, in a whisper, "She stays with him for the night. Next morning she finds herself back in her chamber in Lahore!"

The intriguing hearsay reached the ears of Abu-ul-Nasar Khan, the Governor of Kashmir. Already he regarded Akhun Shah with suspicion. He had the girl traced at Lahore. She was asked to bring back some token of the place whereto she was conveyed every night by the miraculous agency. She fetched an apple with her, when, in the morning, she was back at Lahore. She said she experienced a strange sensation of being flown in the atmosphere during the night.

On this confirmation, the Governor of Kashmir determined to exploit the opportunity to humble the Mulla. But his councillors desired otherwise. One of them, Fidai Khan, asked, "Subedar Sahib, have you heard of Rishi Pir ?"

"Yes, the one people acclaim as *Pir Pandit Padshah*. To the pandits, his co-religionists, he is a Pandit. To Muslims, he is a Pir. To all of them, he is the Padshah (*Badshah)*, the powerful Faqir, who though uncrowned has been enthroned by some saint, Pandit Krishan Ji Kar. We have heard he is a miracle worker."

"Precisely", agreed Fidai Khan, "It is he who helps the Mulla with this black magic kidnappings of girls. Akhun Shah is largely innocent. It is his master, Rishi Pir, falsely styled `Pir Pandit Padshah', who gives him all his powers. You must have heard how Akhun Shah came to accept the Pir as his master?

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"No, we have not, for we were away in suppressing the turbulent Chaks. Do tell us."

"One day", narrated Fadai Khan, "Mulla Akhun invited Rishi Pir and his disciples, numbering hundreds, to a feast, holding that when he talked so much of the oneness of God, he should accept a Muslim's invitation. The Pir consented, saying, 'We will come, on one condition. Nobody must taste the edibles before we and our disciples eat'. On the fixed day, the Pir and other guests sat down to the feast. The covers were taken off the plates. Lo! an astounding metamorphosis of the dishes and other viands took place, as Rishi Pir threw a libation on his plate. Rice was converted into paddy plants, vegetables into respective plants, mutton into sheep that stood up in life and so on! A one-legged cock crowed and hobbled towards the Pir, who addressed the amazed Mulla, 'Look, someone has tasted the leg of this fowl. Our wager has been broken. We will not eat'. The head cook was called. He confessed to having tasted a leg of the fowl. The Pir and his disciples rose and departed. From that day the Akhun recognised the Pir as his master".

"Oh! is it?" the Subedar expressed surprise.

"Yes, Subedar Sahib, it was the talk of the town. I advise you to curb the rising power and influence of this saint-*Padshah*"*.

Abu-ul-Nasar Khan thought over the proposition. He remembered the words of his father, Shaista Khan (the maternal uncle of Emperor Aurangzeb) spoken to him at Delhi, "Son, don't prove an unsuccessful Subedar of Kashmir like your brother, Muzarffar Khan, whom Alamgir called back only after two years. Rule with an iron hand. Don't allow any Kashmiri to become more powerful than he may reasonably be." He sent for Qazi Abul Karim and his preceptor, Mir Hussain Sabzwari. The latter, a faqir who gave himself airs of more spirituality than he possessed, was especially jealous of Rishi Pir, ever since Kashmiris started presenting him tributes as if he were a king.

When Sabzwari incited the Subedar against Rishi Pir, like Fidai Khan, the Qazi, more sagacious, agreed with him to an extent; but he added: "Subedar Sahib, twenty years back in Ramzan 1086 (December 1675) the Great Fire of Srinagar, which destroyed twelve thousand houses of Srinagar, was at once brought under control, when Rishi Pir

* Padshah = emperor.

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had one of his wooden sandals thrown into the fire. The Emperor heard of this when he visited Srinagar and sent the Pir presents. May be, the Emperor still honours him like that".

"That is exactly what must be stopped", remarked the Governor. "No Kashmiri must grow too powerful for me. We shall send a special messenger to Alamgir, telling him all about this disgraceful rumour which we have confirmed. We would tackle the Pir ourselves but we are, to be frank, afraid of the people's reaction. Don't you think when the Emperor hears the tale he will teach the Pir a good lesson?"

Mir Hussain and Khan agreed.

"Strange but true", spoke Alamgir Aurangzeb in his serious tone, "here come reports from Kashmir Governor against a *faqir* whom we have respected".

"Which *faqir*, Sire? asked Shaista Khan.

"Rishi Pir, also known as Pir Pandit Padshah. We met him when we visited Kashmir". Aurangzeb, in his usual secretive way, told him and the courtiers only a part of the contents of the Kashmir letter.

Shaista Khan understood that his son was acting on the instructions that he had given him. He astutely corroborated his son's desire that "the haughty and powerful Pir ought to be summoned to Delhi in the presence of Alamghir."

A rich Kashmir trader was present in the court. He begged permission to speak. The Emperor granted it.

"Sire", the trader addressed the Alamgir with folded hands, "Rishi Pir is a very great saint, the like of whom I have not found in the many countries of Asia that I have travelled. Last year I was returning from Constantinople. A storm rose. It appeared that the ship was about to be sunk. I was perturbed, for most of the cargo belonged to me". Raising his hands, he added: "After praying to Allah, I somehow, remembered Rishi Pir, for I had heard of his beneficent miracles. In my prayer, I made a pledge that I would pay a tithe of my profit as tribute to the throned *faqir*. The storm, believe me, Sire, bated as soon as I opened my eyes. We found ourselves near the safe shore. The weather cracked. We were saved.

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"When, Sire, I reached Srinagar, I forgot to fulfil my mental pledge to Rishi Pir. Imagine my self-consciousness when I accosted him one day in a street. All at once I remembered and felt inwardly guilty. He pointed at me with his raised forefinger and said, 'Look at my shoulder' — taking up the *Pheran* from his neck — 'there is the mark of a wound on it which I sustained on the day when I pulled your ship ashore, and, you, good man, quite forgot your promise to a *faqir*! Is that like a Musalman ?'

"Sire, I trembled from head to foot. I folded my hands, even as I do now, begging pardon for the delay. Next day, I presented the pledged tithe to Rishi Pir. There raged a famine in the City at the time. He had provisions purchased with the money — which ran over a thousand *mohurs* — and distributed it among the destitute folk, Hindus and Muslims."

The Emperor and the courtiers heard the trader with rapt attention. They were all impressed, except the calculating Shaista Khan, who was preoccupied with maintenance of the prestige of the Subedar of Kashmir, his second son.

He wanted to speak, but, Souf Khan, a former Governor of Kashmir, forestalled him: "Sire, Rishi Pir is truly a very great *faqir*. In the year of our Prophet, 1079 (1668 A.D.) my elephant ran amuck in Srinagar. The mad elephant worked havoc in the city. There was panic everywhere. Shops were closed. People ran hither and thither, driven like flies before the wind. The elephant crossed the path of Rishi Pir. His Hindu disciples and Muslim admirers fled in all directions — but not he! He raised his hand, and lo! the elephant came to a standstill, crouching down before him. From that day, Sire, I paid the tribute myself to this great Kashmir Pandit saint."

"Allah! Great Allah!" exclaimed the courtiers, "this is no ordinary mortal".

"True, true", agreed the Emperor, "but what does the present report signify?"

"That, Sire", put in Shaista Khan at the opportune moment, "this Pir is misusing his powers already. He is a unique enthroned saint. His powers may whet his ambition. He may become dangerous to the outpost of Moghul Empire".

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"We are inclined to agree", said the Emperor, "We will summon Rishi Pir. At least we will be enlightened with more facts. Jaswant Singh, issue a *farman** commanding the audience of Rishi Pir in the Moghul Court of Delhi".

Subedar Abuul-Nasar Khan anxiously awaited his messenger back from Delhi. Weeks passed and rolled into months. He had provided the messenger the completest and most speedy means of transport at every stage of the difficult journey which was especially hazardous between the Kashmir frontier and Srinagar.

Meanwhile, the prestige of Rishi Pir continued to increase. People were enamoured of his mystic, attractive personality. Not only did they call him "Pir Pandit Padshah', they also spoke of him as the "Saviour who eases every difficulty". He did perform miracles like a prophet in aiding suffering humanity.

A Muslim middle-aged woman, rich but barren, appealed to Rishi Pir to remove the curse on her which made her husband so unhappy.

"What has a *faqir* to do with your progeny?" he asked her.

"Sire, Pir Pandit Padshah relieves every adversity of every man, wherefore I beg you my boon." She fell at his feet, weeping.

"Stand up, sister", he said to her in assumed anger, "get away. Throw away all your ornaments in the Vitasta when you cross Zaina Kadal. Allah will help you!"

The woman left. She flung her ornaments, but, out of her costly jewellery, she preserved a priceless pearl. In due time a son was born to her. But he was blind of one eye!

With the customary people's tribute of eleven and a half fractions of many things, she repaired her way to Pir Pandit Padshah. She expressed her gratefulness, but complained of the one eye of which her son was bereft.

"Why did you preserve a pearl out of the ornaments, you lover of ornaments?" the Pir questioned her. "Go away and drop that pearl in the river."

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* Summons.

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She cast away the precious pearl. Her sons's eye was restored!

The people heard of this. So did the Governor, who burned to see Rishi Pir growing immensely popular — a formidable rival, he thought, as he was reminded time and again of the admonition of Shaista Khan, and, he realised that Kashmiris, Hindus and Muslims, were united in the growing spirit of resistance against tyranny; Rishi Pir gave an indirect subtle lead to this national sentiment.

Every citizen came to know how Rishi Pir, for the sake of his aged mother, 'brought' the water of Har Mukat Ganga to the Jhelum ghat of his mohalla, Batyar. When Kashmiri pilgrims went to Har Mukat Ganga, she said to her son, Rishi Pir, that she desired to bathe in the holy mountain lake of Ganga Bal. He pointed out, "Mother, you are aged and infirm, you cannot undertake the risky journey. However, you may give one of your bracelets to our *Puroohat* who is going there and ask him to drop it in the lake at the time of the holy bath". She did so.

On the day, when pilgrims bathe in Ganga Bal Lake, after dropping over the ashes of the dead, Rishi Pir said to his mother, "Mother, go to Batyar ghat and have your morning bath".

She went and there, to her wonderment, she saw the bracelet floating in the Jhelum water! Har Mukat Ganga had 'come' to her own ghat ! Her life's ambition was fulfilled, as she bathed in the *ice-cold* water.

Shortly after, she died. Rishi Pir was smitten with grief at the loss of one who had suffered much for his sake, in bringing him up as an orphan boy. He went on a fast for many days.

At this juncture did the messenger of the Subedar return from Delhi, having been delayed by inclement weather on the road to Kashmir. He was accompanied by a courier and a company of soldiers, who had the summons for Rishi Pir. The Subedar was overjoyed at the success of his scheme. He deputed an additional unit of soldiers to carry out the Emperor's *farman*.

The soldiers spread a cordon around the house of Rishi Pir while the courier went inside to serve the summons.

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There was panic in Batyar. The Pathan soldiers did not allow the people to gather anywhere. They ejected the hero-worshipping people from Rishi Pir's house.

Rishi Pir was left with his two chief disciples, Pandit Nana Joo and Pandit Atma Ram. He heard Alamgir's courier over a cup of special Kashmiri tea that he had during fasts. His eyes were bloodshot with anger, but, retaining his poise with a supreme effort, he allowed a smile to play across his lips.

To the courier, he said, "Your Emperor desires us to start on the long and hazardous journey as soon as the *farman* is read out. This is late afternoon now. We must make preparations."

"Yes, Pir," said the blunt Pathan. "You get ready. We'll leave tomorrow morning".

The soldiers' cordon continued as tight as it was. Others dispersed the mobs of people, who protested against the incarceration of their Pir.

Emperor Aurangzeb was in bed. He was a light sleeper, for he was always alert, suspicious of everybody. He heard a sound, a low thud in the chamber. Quickly, he sat up and lighted several candles with the one that was burning at the side of his pillow.

What did he see ?

There, before him, was Rishi Pir, riding — a leopard !

"Rishi Pir ! At this hour ?" he asked, clearing his throat with difficulty.

"Your Majesty called me", Rishi Pir replied mockingly, in Persian.

"Oh, yes! First please send away the fearful leopard — we will talk".

Rishi Pir dismounted. The leopard disappeared !

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"You are a great, pious, God-fearing Emperor", casually remarked Rishi Pir. "People may call me Pir Pandit Padshah and pay me tribute of their love. For their sake, I use the royal 'we' in my talk with them. But I am a *faqir* after all. Why do you injure a *faqir's* feelings ?"

"We are sincerely sorry", replied the Emperor in a penitential tone. "You are great. You have vouchsafed us a new vision. You are the 'Emperor of Both Worlds'. I bestow that title upon you, great Pandit".

"But, Sire", sarcastically spoke Rishi Pir, "your mustachioed soldiers have besieged my poor cottage".

"No, no, we don't want your attendance at court now."

"And, the proof?"

"Here and now, we will write a new *farman*".

The Emperor looked about — he found pen and paper, but not an inkpot. To himself, he said, "Where is the inkpot ? I had placed one here".

"Sire, blood is used as ink in an emergency."

"Yes, yes, you are right, 'Emperor of the Both Worlds' ", the Emperor hustled as he pricked the index finger of his left hand for blood. Not much blood came out of the shrunken frame. He collected the drops on a tray and wrote a *farman*, revoking the previous one. He addressed Rishi Pir as "Emperor of Both Worlds" and commanded the Subedar of Kashmir to personally pay an annual tribute to the Pir. He then sealed the *farman* with his signet ring.

The leopard reappeared with another thud. Rishi Pir rode the spotted fierce-looking beast and vanished...

The outspoken Pathan knocked at the door of Pir Pandit Padshah next morning. The two disciples, who were still there, asked the courier to take a seat. He would not sit down. He was about to walk, with shoes on, towards Rishi Pir's throne, when the Pir shouted at him, "Foolish Pathan, know your manners !"

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The ring of the voice stunned the courier. He stopped short.

"Here is your Emperor's new *farman*", added Rishi Pir. A disciple handed over the envelope to the courier. He was amazed as he saw the mark of the signet ring of the emperor. He looked at it once again, in great bewilderment. He opened the envelope carefully, and read — Allah, what was it all? He retreated, bowed low, and lower still, before Rishi Pir, saying, "Emperor of Both Worlds, forgive me. I was doing my duty".

"We have eyes to see that. Now go to the Subedar. We want to have a chat with him".

The news of the incredible miracle spread like wild fire. People, Hindus and Muslims, were happy that Rishi Pir's honour was vindicated. And, now Pir Pandit Padshah was "Emperor of Both Worlds!" This triumph symbolised the end of tyranny. Mulla Shah came with his disciples and expressed his increased admiration of and gratefulness to the great Pir. So did hundreds of noblemen and commoners, Hindu and Muslim alike. Rishi Pir just smiled at them.

Abu-ul-Nasar Khan was very much disappointed when the courier showed him the Emperor's second *farman*. Reluctantly, he, accompanied by Fidai Khan, went to Pir Pandit Padshah in the afternoon. He saw the Batyar locality bustling with excited, happy people who shouted slogans in praise of Pir Pandit Padshah, "Emperor of Both Worlds", "Reliever of Every Difficulty", and so on. They knew of the intrigue of Mir Hussain Sabzwari and, therefore, they asked the Subedar to make Sabzwari quit Kashmir. Consequently, the bogus saint himself fled.

Rishi Pir smiled as the Governor bowed deferentially. He pointed him to a pillowed seat near him. The Governor presented a huge regal tribute in obedience to the Emperor's command.

While they talked formally, in came a disciple of Rishi Pir and addressed him, "Pir Pandit Padshah, my mother is dead! Help me!"

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"What help, Nanak Shah?" questioned Rishi Pir, "Your mother was old. It is good she is dead at a ripe age. Console yourself".

"Sire, you are the reliever of every difficulty of man. You are the Emperor of Both Worlds. You command both this and the next world. Help me, Pir Pandit Padshah, I can't live without my mother!"

Rishi Pir mused for a few moments. "Nanak Shah, the predestined span of life can be changed only one way", he proposed. "Will you sacrifice the years of your own life that you want your mother to live?"

"Yes, Sire."

"How many?"

"Fourteen".

"All right, Nanak Shah", commanded Rishi Pir, "go to your home. Break fourteen water chestnuts under her pillow".

Nanak Shah did as he was told. Lo ! the spring of life returned to his erstwhile dead mother. She was alive!

The Subedar, or the others who succeeded him, presented the yearly tribute to Pir Pandit Padshah. More and more miracles in relief of the unhappy and the suffering fetched him added renown.

In Batyar, in Srinagar, there is the shrine of Rishi Pir whither repair men in the straits of life; they touch a sandal of the Pir, the only memento left — the other one was thrown in the Great Fire of Srinagar — and pay the tribute. So did every Governor of Kashmir, annually, until the late forties of this century.

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The Lost Concubine

Anarchy followed the decline of the Moghul Empire. Conditions were very much unsettled in Kashmir. Many Kashmiris migrated from Kashmir to the plains, as they also did in later repressive regimes. One of the these self-exiles was Zairam Bhan—a resourceful, intelligent and sagacious Kashmiri Pandit -- the present writer's (maternal) ancestor. Zairam Bhan found favour with and rose to high position in the Delhi court of Nasir-ud-Din Muhammad Shah (1719-1748 A.D.). Interesting incidents led to the climax when...

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10
The Lost Concubine

"Could you lend me your daughter's old books", she requested Pandit Aftab Ji Jotshi, timorously, as she placed the earthen pitcher on the wooden stand oiled by constant use. Her teeth were chattering in the freezing cold. At the slippery river *ghat*, she had balanced herself, thanks to her grass shoes, with great difficulty. There she had broken the hard crust of water with a small stone pestle that she carried in her spacious *pheran* pocket. On her way back she had decided to ask the Jotshi Ji for books for she could no longer bear the harsh old Patshala Pandit belabouring her only son, day in and day out, because the poor orphan could not manage to have books.

"Tulsi sister, you'll have them directly", replied Aftab Ji, looking into her eyes where deep misery and silent fortitude were writ large. "Do you need them for your son?"

"Yes, Pandit Sahib", she stammered. Tears suddenly appeared in her eyes, she knew not how.

Pandit Aftab Ji saw the tears beading her sad eyes. Impulsively, he felt a pang of pity for this forlorn widow, who maintained herself and her only son by drudging in his home as the water carrier. He observed that her fingers were yet very pale from benumbing contact with the ice-cold water of the Jhelum. Would happiness ever again play in those eyes that spoke volumes of solitary melancholy? She had one hope, her son. Why not consult the horoscope of her son? For once he would have a look at one without the idea of a fee, in cash or kind.

To her he said, after his daughter had fetched the books, "Here are the books for your son. When you come tomorrow morning, get along with you the horoscope of your son. I'll have a look at it".

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Grateful Tulsi thanked her benefactor profusely, and warming her aching hands on the *kangri** went to her nearby tenement of a home.

"What you are thinking of is nothing short of folly", declared the spouse of Pandit Aftab Ji. For once in her life, she stood up against her husband. A typically obedient, docile and self-abnegating Panditani as she was, she could not control herself at this juncture. All her dreams of marrying her only daughter in a high respectable family were crumbling down as her husband told her his mind. It sounded a silly fancy to her though she did not say as much.

"Look here", calmly said the Jotshi. "I looked up the horoscope of Zairam just to see whether he would be any good to his widow mother. As I glanced at the astrological groupings, I calculated a most remarkable and exceptional combination".

After a little thought, while he recapitulated the figures with seeming relish, he added, "I consulted it more closely. I have found that Zairam will be a great man, a very great Kashmiri indeed. And, therefore, my daughter must be married to him. I shall properly educate him now. You see you have to trust me".

"Yes, my lord. I trust you, but what will the world say?" earnestly pleaded his wife. "Tulsi, our water-carrier, will become the mother-in-law of my dear Sona Batni, the apple of our eye. What will our cousin people say? They will spit on me. They will not join the nuptial feast. They may not even talk to us. They might think that we have let down the joint family. They will surely curse us. This is so much mud on my head-dress. It is a violation of and a calamity on my Karma. Stones on my fate!"

Aftab Ji listened to her coolly. He knew how to manage her — and he did.

Zairam's education was taken up by Aftab Ji. He disallowed Tulsi to do any labour. He shifted them to a better house. Zairam picked up Sanskrit and Persian in the most precocious manner. He outshone his teachers and made a name for himself among academic circles of Srinagar and the entire Valley. Securing a job in the government, he

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* Earthenware fire-pot used by Kashmiris in winter.

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soon rose to be the assistant of a secretary to the government. Aftab Ji's wife was now well pleased.

After some time the marriage ceremony of Zairam to Sona Batni took place. Zairam was happily married. He was affluent but he was discontented. A curious wanderlust seized him. He felt he must try his luck without the narrow confines of the Valley of Kashmir that somehow made man lazy, over-contented and static.

The mid-day sun parched the dry earth, baking it like a cake. Man and animal, unable to stand the scorching glare, sought precarious shelter under the sparse trees, in the scattered mountain huts, and near the thinning stream whose cool vapour was lost in the overwhelming intolerable hot winds. The moor stretching farther from the hillside showed no sign of life. Birds roosted in corners. The nearby fields were deserted for the time being. The palace haughtily seated over the hill mound indifferently faced the relentless sun.

A figure stepped out of the palace. It was a man's form. Something in the tall and straight gait, easy and dignified bearing, the rustling yellow gown, the close pyjamas, the necklaces and the well-bound small turban could have told the observer—had there been one—that it was the Raja. People of Rajauri loved him for he was not the usual type of oriental despot. He called them his children and treated them as such. There was a sad, concerned look in his eyes. He was anxious about the public weal. He had received a report that it was drying up. He must see it for himself. At this time no one would be about. He did not mind that it was dangerous to move about in the burning heat. On and on he went, covering the nape of his neck with the loose end of his turban. The well, he satisfied himself, was all right. The panicky rumour was wrong. Perhaps the contractor wanted to earn money for needless repairs which he would only execute on paper.

What did he see? He recoiled a step, his hand unconsciously going to the hilt of his sword. But he did not draw it. He stood unmoving, with bated breath. Before him, under a mango tree, he saw the sleeping form of a beautiful man who looked a Kashmiri from his face and dress. The shade had left him. And there was a cobra, coiled with outspread hood, guarding his face from the fierce sun. The shadow of the cobra's head fell exactly on the head of the man! There was a ruddy glow on the face.

The Raja moved a step, audibly kicking a pebble. The sleeping figure moved about to get up. The cobra showing a glint of its forked

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tongue, uncoiled and hissed away. The man got up; rubbing his eyes and yawning, he faced the curious Raja.

"Who are you?" each questioned the other.

Zairam Bhan said his tale, respectfully, adding that he was going to Delhi to find a job that would satisfy him.

"Come on Pandit, stay with me", offered the Raja. Zairam Bhan would not agree.

The Raja, after having watched the marvellous occurrence that saved Zairam Bhan's life, felt sure that he was a great man, a noble soul. He told him how the cobra had miraculously saved him from the terrible sun.

"This is the play of God Shiva," Zairam, steeped in the Shaivist philosophy of Kashmir, replied simply. "I was dead tired. I had a strange dream. God Shiva placed his hand on my head and said to me, 'Get up, I shall protect you.' "

Invited to the palace, Zairam Bhan stayed there as the royal guest. Getting the reluctant permission of the Raja of Rajauri, he resumed his long and arduous journey to Delhi, loaded with the presents of the Raja and the amenities of travel that he afforded him.

"She was the best Pathan girl in the harem", said one.

"Who, brother? Whom are you talking about?" enquired an eager voice, joining the crowd.

"Why? Have you not heard? You live in the city?" questioned him one, without satisfying his curiosity.

"The royal harem has lost a concubine. The Emperor is very much displeased", disclosed a well-informed old man.

"She is a young thing, the latest thing, I tell you", said a young man, winking mischievously at the old man and gesticulating at the Delhi Palace gate, near which they were talking.

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"Our Emperor has every reason to be upset", put in another Pickwick.

From an inconspicuous corner of the street, near a corner of the palace gate, a man stood up from the raised pavement and joined the crowd. Several people looked at his strange dress, his long flowing gown, his shawl of exquisite design and his beautiful carved stick. Gathering that he was a stranger, they readily acquainted him with the exciting rumour on which they were feasting.

"Let me see, let me look up my papers", said the man, in broken Hindustani.

Some people giggled at his northern accent. Others thought that he was mad. They did not know that the man was Zairam Bhan, who had reached Delhi two days back. For these days, he had taken a seat by a niche of the palace gate. As his fancy would have it, he had maintained a close record of all the people who went in the palace or came out of it.

"The stranger is a fool", mildly reproved an outspoken tongue. Others followed suit, with worse slang and open insinuations.

Cool and unruffled, Zairam Bhan squared up his tables. His Kashmiri tact and sagacity came handy to him. Why should he speak out to this whimsical crowd? He only said, "I can tell the Emperor what he wants to know".

"Here is a wiseacre who can advise the Emperor", shouted a youth lustily.

One of the Wazirs passed out of the gate and heard this. Zairam Bhan kept his eye on the gate. He took his reed pen from his ear and his Kashmir *papier mache* folding ink-stand from the deep pocket of his *pheran*, and made a neat entry on the parchment.

The crowd broke into a roar of laughter. The Wazir walked towards the crowd. He was told that a stranger "would help out" the Emperor. Measuring Zairam from top to toe, he took his hand and conducted him to the hall where the Emperor held court. The Wazir could not make anything out from the entries made by Zairam Bhan but he thought that these might furnish a clue to the whereabouts of the

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absconding concubine. This might incidentally ingratiate him with the Emperor.

The usher announced them into the full *durbar*.

"Who is this man?" said the Emperor Muhammad Shah, to the Wazir.

"Your Majesty, he is a Kashmiri Pandit", respectfully replied the Wazir, "He has kept a record of all the people who came inside or left the royal gate".

The Emperor interrupted him and rather angrily addressed Zairam Pandit, who stood with bended knees and clasped hands, "Why did you keep a record like this, you Pandit? It was none of your business".

"Sire, a Kashmiri Pandit never keeps himself idle. I had no work on my hands since I arrived in Your Majesty's capital two days back. So, I passed the time by keeping this record".

"All right", said the pacified Emperor. "What have you to say, on the basis of that?"

"Your Majesty, the number of persons who left the palace and came into it, for the last two days, is quite the same. The conclusion that this, Your Majesty's humble servant draws, is that the concubine reported to be missing, has not left the palace at all, but is within the palace".

The courtiers received the revelation with mixed comments. Some applauded the idea. Most of them jeered at it. The Emperor thought a little and then gave directions for a thorough search to be made within the palace. Zairam Bhan and the Wazir were among those deputed to conduct the raid.

No clue was to be had for an hour or so. The Wazir gave Zairam Bhan a look that spoke volumes of despair. But Zairam was cool, dignified and silent. He was thinking hard. He made up his mind.

Under his orders, all the servants, male and female, were made to stand in two rows, facing one another. He made the young male

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servants to take off their liveried long coats. And lo! among the youthful servants, was the missing concubine, dressed up as a boy, intending to flee in that disguise.

The news spread like wildfire. The Emperor himself came to the harem and, patting Zairam Bhan, said, "We are very much pleased with you. We admire your sagacity. We make you our Dewan. A brilliant Kashmiri Pandit will be our Dewan henceforth".

Lovely spring had bedecked almond and apricot trees in perfect splendour. Kashmiris — Hindu and Muslims — basked in fruit orchards enjoying hot baked water-chestnuts over the fresh, soft grass, and enjoying the romantic sight of fruit trees in their gorgeous pink and white dresses, looking splendid against the background of snow-capped mountains that girdle the Valley of Kashmir, making it a veritable "Eden of the East". Kashmiri tea steamed from *samovars* of artistic shape and design. Singing parties chanted chorus songs and small crowds of Hindus and Muslims, who knew no differences on such festive common holidays, gathered around them.

In one such group sat Pandit Aftab Ji, his wife, his daughter and his devoted factotum, Barkat Lon. Ever since the departure of Zairam Bhan to Delhi, his wife, Sona Batni, had been sad and pensive. Her father, the renowned astrologer, assured her after every fresh calculation of Zairam Bhan's horoscope that his brilliant period was to commence shortly. Today he had made his *prashna* — a summary calculation. He had predicted that the good news would reach them this day, while they would be at the feet of the Goddess, that is at the foot of Hari Parbat hillock, in the famous almond orchards. Barkat Lon, the trusted servant of Pandit Aftab Ji, who managed his clients and his lands, was also the foster-brother of his daughter, Sona Batni. She loved him as her brother. The thought that he was a Muslim never entered the head of any one in the family. He was a part and parcel of the family. Pandit Aftab Ji had him educated and he liked him for his wit and wisdom. More than any other, he consoled his foster sister that all would be well with Zairam Bhan.

Sona Batni did not see the merry holiday-makers dancing amidst singing groups. She heard the *santoor** but it did not enrapture her. The soft petals of the blossom blowing in curves before the breeze did not

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catch her eye. She looked further than the playful kites, the grand mountains, into space — visualising Zairam Bhan in strangely different surroundings. Would he forget her? The womanly fear sent a little shiver through her silent frame and she felt the scented breeze blushing her high, Aryan blonde countenance.

There was a hubbub among the basking holiday-makers. A tall horse, with a strangely dressed man, could be discerned inside the concourse. The rider asked the people many a question. Barkat Lon ran to him. Sure enough, it was a messenger from Delhi from Zairam Bhan himself!

The messenger paid respects to Pandit Aftab Ji and read the scroll. A faint smile curled the Pandit's grave lips as he knew about the accomplishment of his prophecy. All these years he had lived for this day. He was happy, even exulted, but he did not show it. To ward off the evil eye, he actually posed to be otherwise and said to his wife and the spectators, who pressed upon him, "Zairam Bhan has taken employment in Delhi under the Emperor. He will soon forget us. This is what happens to those young Kashmiris who leave this beautiful land of blossoms and valleys and contentment".

Sona Batni was happy. She blushed deeply and looked at the earth, feeling like kissing the daisies. They went back to their home along with the Delhi messenger. With interest and wonderment they heard the Delhi episode of the lost concubine, that was to become a legend in Kashmir.

According to Zairam Bhan's instructions, Barkat Lon accompanied the messenger back to Delhi. Sona Batni gave him a brief letter for her husband, entreating him that he should not forget his 'Mother'. She hinted that Kashmir was unhappy under the despotic regime of an autocratic governor.

Barkat Lon, who was dear to Zairam Bhan as his brother, was accorded a warm reception by him at Delhi. After a month Lon returned to Kashmir at the head of a long line of warriors, with orders from Delhi to take over the administration of Kashmir from the Governor. Pandit Aftab Ji was the happiest man on the happy occasion. Kashmiris were proud to have their own governor who would not fleece or exploit them. Bonfires were lit throughout the city. Sacred

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* Kashmiri musical instrument.

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ceremonies were performed. Alms were distributed among the poor. Everyone blessed Zairam Bhan.

A week later, Sona Batni and her mother-in-law left for Delhi on elephants that had been sent by Zairam Bhan. Barkat Lon, the newly-installed Governor, Pandit Aftab Ji, his chief minister and a large crowd bade them farewell. The long procession, headed by elephants, ascended mountain heights of the route and everywhere, people applauded them with, "Long Live Pandit Zairam Bhan! May God bless our saviour!"

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Saviour of Kashmir

Kashmiris groaned under the tyrannical yoke of the Afghans, who ruled Kashmir from 1750 A.D., when Ahmad Shah Durrani of Kabul conquered the Valley, for sixty years. Pathans exploited and plundered Kashmiris, leaving them so many beggars.

George Forster, who visited Kashmir in 1783 A.D., wrote how the Afghan government raised the revenue from three and a half crores in the time of Aurangzeb to twenty crores in the governorship of Jabbar Khan, the last of the tribe. The regime was cruel and barbarous, one of "brutal tyranny unrelieved by good work, chivalry or honour" (Lawrence).

Someone had to bell the cat. Pandit Birbal Dhar—the present writer's ancestor—a "diplomatic courtier" and revenue collector, took it upon himself to invite Maharaja Ranjit Singh and thus to finish Afghan rule of Kashmir.

A 'Judas' betrayed Birbal Dhar, "the pioneer of undaunted perseverance" (Pandit Anand Kaul) — and his family — but could not frustrate his mission...

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11
Saviour of Kashmir

Afghan rule was at the zenith of its glory in Kashmir. Oppression was the order of the day. Pathans cruelly treated all Kashmiris, whether Hindus or Muslims. Kashmiris groaned under the tyrannical yoke of the ruthless foreigner. They heard many salutary things about the new kingdom of Sikhs in the Punjab, headed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who, it was said, was a just ruler. Would that Ranjit Singh might send his conquering armies to Kashmir, expel the brutal Pathans and place Kashmir under his aegis? Every Kashmiri eagerly desired that change but how could any one dare to go to Lahore Durbar and invite the great Maharaja to extend his sway over to Kashmir and save the Kashmiris from the inhuman oppression? Pathans organisedly spied every Kashmiri who was a somebody. They tracked his every movement lest he should conspire against the government.

One of these hounded Kashmiris was Pandit Birbal Dhar. He possessed a large acreage of lands and he was very influential. The Governor feared him but dared not uproot him, for he could not be sure about the popular reaction. He knew full well that Kashmiris were fed up with his tyranny. Spies infested Birbal Dhar's house. He knew that. He used his family code in his correspondence to his intimate associates with whom he conspired to overthrow the Pathans. After a long meeting, it was decided that Birbal Dhar should proceed to Lahore.

Suddenly, the people deputed to spy on Birbal Dhar found to their chagrin that he had disappeared. No clue was available as to the whereabouts of the fugitive. Azim Khan, the Governor, sent his fastest cavaliers to track him along the Pir Panchal route to the boundaries of Kashmir. They returned without their prey. Subsequently, Azim Khan

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somehow came to know that Birbal Dhar had escaped in disguise and that his wife and daughter-in-law were in hiding somewhere in Srinagar. His anger and lust were aroused against the two ladies. He had heard much about the beauty of Birbal Dhar's wife. Now the opportunity to wreak vengence against Birbal Dhar offered itself in the pleasant form of dishonouring his wife. He despatched his spies and troops everywhere in the city to make searches for her. In the course of these raids, the Pathan troops committed many untold atrocities upon many innocent Kashmiri families. But no trace was to be found of the missing ladies.

Mirza Pandit sat calm and sedate in his big palace of a home. He was very anxious about the fate of the mission of his nephew, Birbal Dhar. Off and on, he received scanty news of his nephew's journey. He was on tenterhooks all the time but he did not show it.

As he had anticipated, one day Azim Khan summoned him to his court, where he sat in full state, surrounded by swaggering Afghan officials, fingering their long, pointed moustaches.

"So you have come, Mirza," sneered Azim Khan.

"Yes, Your Highness, I must obey your summons".

"Will you not tell us where your scoundrel of a nephew has gone to?'

"To me he is not a scoundrel", retorted Mirza Pandit, "nor do I know his whereabouts".

"You must answer my question on pain of death".

"If I must, here it is", boldly replied Mirza Pandit, "If he is satiated with the world, he has gone to the holy Ganga to spend the rest of his life there in meditation. Otherwise, he has gone to the Sikhs to fetch their help against Your Highness".

The Pathan liked this nonchalant reply but, affecting anger, said, "What must we do to you?"

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"Kill Mirza Pandit", was the still bolder reply.

Azim Khan let Mirza Pandit Dhar go.

When Mirza Pandit Dhar left, Azim Khan was upset, very much so. In his room he paced about like a tiger, held at bay. He shouted aloud, "I have an idea", and then continued lustily, "I shall still have her". The orderly outside was puzzled on hearing his master thus talking to himself. He came in and *salaamed* just to see that the Governor was all right.

"Go just now and command Wasa Kak to my presence". The orderly despatched the messengers who returned with Wasa Kak.

With tottering steps, Wasa Kak advanced to the mighty presence of the Governor. He was a weak, thin man, who presented a vivid contrast to the tall and stalwart Pathan Governor, before whom he always trembled with fear.

"We command you", thundered the Pathan, "to produce Birbal Dhar's wife and daughter-in-law before us within ten days. If you succeed, we shall amply reward you. Else we will impose a fine of one thousand rupees for each day of delay".

With this Wasa Kak was dismissed. He did not know what to do. He knew that the majority of Muslims were disgusted with Pathan rule, though a small faction sided with the Governor. He did not want to betray Mirza Pandit Dhar. Nor would he invite the displeasure of the wily Pathan, who, he knew to his cost, was extremely unscrupulous.

"Do you know that your brother has absconded?" said Telak Chand Munshi to his wife.

"Yes, my lord, Birbal Kak is away at Lahore. He is a brave Kashmiri. He will free us from cruel Pathans".

"That is right. But where is his wife and daughter? Why did he not send them here?"

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"They should have been sent here, my lord, but my brother thought of your safety. Therefore they are in disguise at the house of Qudus, the milkman, who is very faithful to my father's family. But, please, you know, this is a close secret. I have not broken any trust in letting you know, because you are as anxious about their safety as I am".

Telak Chand nodded his head, mechanically.

For a long time, Telak Chand Munshi had nourished a secret, gnawing jealousy against the rising prosperity of the house of his father-in-law, Mirza Pandit Dhar. He shared their wealth in many ways, but he was especially sullen at the increasing influence of Birbal Dhar. Two days after the disclosure of his wife to him, he came to know that there was a heavy price on the heads of the wife and daughter-in-law of Birbal Dhar. The idle profession of a banker had intensified his greed of money. To that was now added the fire of jealousy, that raged within his Jewish breast. He had an old grievance against Wasa Kak Munshi and he did not want that Wasa Kak should curry favour with the court.

The dead of night found Telak Chand Munshi, the veritable Judas of Kashmir, in the bed-chamber of Azim Khan, to whom he disclosed the whereabouts of the absconding women, who were immediately arrested.

For such an emergency Birbal Dhar's wife had preserved a potion of poison. In the small hours, the Afghan police surrounded her house. She well knew their errand and, before allowing them to talk, said like a Rajput woman, "Yes, I am coming to the Governor. Let me dress". She went to a dingy, dark room in the milkman's house and, after changing her night clothes, gulped down the potion. Her weeping daughter-in-law came alongside of Qudus, who was handcuffed and badly maltreated by the bullying Pathan soldiers.

The two ladies were conducted to a gay *Shikara* which was paddled up the Jhelum by many a boatman. When they reached the palace ghat and asked Birbal Dhar's wife to get up, she said her last words, albeit feebly, "Know that Kashmir has yet a Kota Rani. Remember me to my Lord!"

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The corpse of the heroic lady was taken up the ghat. The plighted daughter-in-law tore her hair and beat her breast. Azim Khan had not his eyes on her but on her mother-in-low. He had her sent to his Kabul harem. He ordered Qudus to be executed on the spot.

The last words of Qudus were : "Wily Pathan, you are already doomed. My master will revenge this atrocity". That incensed the wily Pathan who then signed a death warrant for Wasa Kak Munshi for he had failed to do the Governor's bidding. Later, in the day, he appointed Telak Chand Munshi to a high post. He held that post for only a fortnight when the Sikhs, after conquering Kashmir, executed him as well as his master, Azim Khan. Birbal Dhar, the `Saviour of Kashmir', was given a big welcome in Srinagar, by the grateful people.

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Colonel Mian Singh

Sikhs ruled Kashmir from 1819 to 1846 A.D. — the year when the State was transferred to Maharaja Gulab Singh by the British Government. From the accounts of Moorecraft, who travelled in Kashmir in 1824, it appears that Sikh rule was not so barbarous as that of the Afghans, but it was harsh and autocratic.

Among the stern Sikh Subedars, there were honourable exceptions. Col. Mian Singh — the German baron, Charles Hugel, calls him Mohan Singh in his illuminating travel diary. He was the Governor of Kashmir from 1834 to 1841 A.D., the stormy period for Sikhs in the Punjab, provided the oasis in the dreary waste. He wiped out the menace of Galabans, the thugs peculiar to Kashmir. Grateful people called him 'Prophet of Mercy' when he fed them during famines. His justice was rough and ready, but effective. He was — well, read about him and know for yourself...

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12
Colonel Mian Singh

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a-hunting in a forest along with Jamadar Khushal Singh—who had arrived from Kashmir — Colonel Mian Singh, Raja Dhyan Singh and other courtiers. The hunters rode horses. Handsome, tall, upstart Khushal Singh talked with the Maharaja, whom he had just presented costly shawls, the details of the monthly revenue and other affairs of Kashmir, which was then under the governorship of Prince Sher Singh. He praised the administration, whose virtual head he himself was.

A hare came in view. Khushal Singh ran his horse after the game. Others stayed behind. Mian Singh rode back to the base camp and went to his tent. The hare that the Jamadar pursued ran with the speed of lightning, out of the range of his gun. By a circuitous route, the hare jumped over thickets and reached the tent of Mian Singh. The frightened animal darted in, seeking safety.

Mian Singh had just entered. He took up the hare, feeling the beautiful animal's beating heart. In a few moments, Jamadar Khushal Singh turned up, and seeing the hare in the lap of Mian Singh, said, "Colonel Sahib, this is my game. Release the hare"

"No, I shall not."

"Why so, Colonel Mian Singh?'

"The hare has come into my tent. It has sought my shelter. I must protect my guest".

Jamadar Khushal Singh, thus tantalised, lost his temper. They exchanged hot words. The orderlies reported the matter to the Maharaja, who summoned the two officers to his presence.

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The Maharaja, fresh from the hunt, was inclined to be humorous. He addressed Mian Singh, "Colonel, is the disputed hare your child?"

"Sire", the Colonel replied, "the hare became my ward once it entered my tent. Chivalry demands that I must shelter it".

"Sire", said the Jamadar", the hare is my game. I gave chase to it. Col. Mian Singh has no right to it".

"Colonel," said the Maharaja, who was easily persuaded by Khushal Singh, "Khushal Singh is right. The game is his. Give it to him".

"Not on my life, Sire. Take away my life, but I shall not give up a living being that is in my protection."

Momentarily, the Maharaja grew angry. His wrath could spell anything for the unhappy man who provoked it. But he wasn't impulsive. He thought awhile and mused over the reply that he really liked. He asked Khushal Singh not to pursue his demand any further. The matter was dropped.

Secretly, Maharaja Ranjit Singh appreciated the conduct of Mian Singh. As his way was, he rarely showed his likes. Instead, he feigned that he was displeased with Mian Singh, for having disobeyed him.

After a few months, a battle was fought between Sikhs and Pathans. Colonel Mian Singh led a Sikh regiment. He was severely wounded and he lay prostrate among those that were slain on the battlefield. Towards the night, a party of Pathans enjoying a brief spell of victory, walked over the dead Sikh soldiers, stripping most of them of their clothes and arms.

When the Pathans saw Mian Singh, among the dead Sikh warriors, they said, "What a Jat Khalsa. It is impossible to fleece his uniform".

"Well, let me try this", said one as he plunged his dagger in the side of Mian Singh. The Colonel, full of courage, endurance and fortitude, did not utter a groan as he received the excruciating thrust.

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Next day, Sikh replacements came and defeated the Pathans. Colonel Mian Singh was picked up. His wounds healed and, once again, the redoubtable brave Sikh warrior was able to attend the court of the Maharaja.

The Maharaja heard of this episode, testifying to the mettle of Mian Singh. He was now well pleased with the Colonel and desired to reward him suitably by placing him on a deserved post.

Reports came from Kashmir that the administration of Prince Sher Singh was going from bad to worse. There was famine in the Valley in the year 1832 A.D. Khushal Singh was the *do facto Subedar** of Kashmir though he was only a deputy of the *Subedar*. Aided by corrupt Kashmiri officials, Warris Khan and Chander Bhan, and the Punjabis, Raj Chand and Devi Sahai, he oppressed and suppressed the famished people and extorted heavy taxes from them. The Khalsa army behaved like an army of occupation, as it were, treating Kashmiris like so many chattels. People migrated from the Valley in large numbers. The famine-stricken trekkers reached Lahore. Maharaja Ranjit Singh heard their tales of woe. The exodus increased day by day.

To forestall the effect of these reports upon the Maharaja, Khushal Singh sent to him the customary presents, to which he added many of his own, as well as the arrears of the monthly revenues. Receiving this, the Maharaja wrote back through a courier." We are pleased with your punctuality in sending revenue, etc. But, alas, you have spoiled Kashmir".

During the year 1833 A.D., there was some little amelioration in the lot of the starving people when two-thirds of the revenues were exempted. Even then Kashmiris trekked down to the plains. The Maharaja received reports from his spies, and otherwise. In 1834, A.D. he recalled Sher Singh and Khushal Singh to Lahore and deputed Col. Mian Singh as the Governor of Kashmir.

The spring had set in. The fruit trees were in the grandeur of their gorgeous blossom when Col. Mian Singh entered Srinagar. His fair reputation had preceded him. The delighted people cheered from the crowded banks, as the boat procession went up the Jhelum. They were

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* Governor.

Kashmir Treasure Collection.Digitization by eGangotri

right in cherishing hopes of a very much needed welcome change. Col. Mian Singh responded to the ovation smilingly. He was shocked to see the City so dirty, the people looking haggard and their houses so many pictures of gloom.

Remembering the words of the Maharaja that he must uplift Kashmir into a prosperous and happy country, the Colonel set about the great work earnestly. He imported 50,000 maunds of grain from the Punjab and had them distributed among the people on a much lower price than the government had paid for. This largesse was unprecedented.

The corrupt officialdom was shaken to the very bottom. Scenting trouble from the intriguing officials, the *Subedar* selected the most honest and reliable men for key posts of the administration. Pandit Ganesh Dhar was appointed *Sahib Kar**. He was inspired by the selfless Colonel who was always keen on the welfare of his subjects. From Rajauri, Muzaffarabad, Karnah and Kishtwar, paddy was obtained at the rate of sixteen rupees per *Khirwar* and sold to the people of the Valley at three rupees a *Khirwar*. Cattle, fowl and buffaloes were freely distributed among farmers. For once Kashmiris breathed relief from the brutal oppressions to which earlier *Subedars* and more so, their officials and the unruly Sikh soldiers, had subjected them to. They said, "The Prophet of Mercy has come to Kashmir. May God bless him!"

Col. Mian Singh was inexorably consistent in his solicitude for the welfare of the people. In Anantnag he found an avaricious *Jagirdar*, Jagarnath Mam. The haughty landlord gave himself airs of being a *yogi* but he would not give away to the famished poor anything from his huge stores. The *Subedar* appealed to him to spare some of his grain for the starved poor.

Jagarnath would have none of it. "Who are you"? he said to the *Subedar*. "I am the supreme authority here".

The Colonel was flung into righteous indignation. He commanded this greedy and cruel exploiter of the people to be hanged on the spot. The corpse was left hanging on the tree — a stern reminder to profiteers. The paddy and maize that he had hoarded were distributed among the people.

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* A high revenue official.

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The erstwhile oppressed and famished people had enough to eat. Having two square meals a day was no longer considered a luxury. Their energy replenished, they attended to their land with redoubled vigour The fertile land of the Valley yielded rich returns. Kashmiris were once more prosperous, thanks to the *Subedar*, who recalled the beneficent reigns of Lalitaditya and 'Badshah'.

Next, Colonel Mian Singh — he had since been raised to the rank of a general but he was still called Colonel — turned his vigilant attention to the suppression of Galabans. They were a band of three hundred or so robbers, led by the formidable Khairo. They openly committed dacoities and abductions. Kashmiris were scared of these mounted robbers who carried away cattle and sheep, movable property, money, everything. In the time of the earlier *Subedar*, the government officials were themselves as good as robbers. How could they take active steps to annihilate this constant and growing menace?

The present *Subedar*, who placed the well-being of the subjects above everything else, was quite different, of an altogether different mould. He sent Dewan Kaban Singh to Kamraj and himself, at the head of other forces, went to Maraj — the other half of the Valley — to encircle and fight the Galabans. Spreading a strangle-hold around them, the two able Sikh warriors sandwiched the ringleaders in a tightening grip. They were hanged on roadside trees and their corpses were left dangling to act the lesson to other desperadoes.

More than half of the Galabans were taken to book. Khairo eluded arrest for sometime with a price on his head. The *Mukdum** of a village gave him over to the police and he was hanged in the city on the main props of Zaina Kadal, where the corpse was left hanging. With that the dreaded menace was wiped away for ever.

A special tax, called *Nikah*, used to be levied from Muslims. The *Subedar*, obtaining the sanction of the Lahore Durbar, with not a little difficulty and an amount of tact, remitted this tax.

The masses, comprised of Muslims, had reason enough to be grateful to the reputed "Prophet of Mercy" and to pray for the continuation of governorship of the Colonel. The Kashmiri traders who went to Lahore conveyed this fervent desire of the people to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. For once the Maharaja renounced his policy of changing the Kashmir governor after every two or three years.

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* A village official who settles small disputes.

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People went straight to the Colonel to demand justice from him. Two farmers who owned two mares presented themselves in the court of the *Subedar*. A colt was also with them. They had left their mares in a mountain pasture for summer months. The colt was born of one mare. the other mare also somehow grew into a milch mare. The colt was petted by both mares and fed itself even then on the milk of both mares. Each farmer claimed the colt as the offspring of his own mare.

The sagacious *Subedar* had the mares taken to a ghat, where they were tied. The colt was conducted in a boat to the middle of the river. Then, by the order of the *Subedar*, the mares were let loose. The mare that was the real mother swam into the water! Could there be a better test to determine the mother of the colt?

"A second Solomon* has come to Kashmir", praised every Kashmiri, as the wise *Subedar* became a veritable fount of justice.

They added, "Even a crow can seek justice from the Sikh *Subedar*". It was said that a crow, seeing the poplar, on which its nest was built, about to be felled, cawed piteously and noisily over the palace of the *Subedar*. The alert Colonel heard the crow and deputed a mounted soldier after the crow. As the crow flew over the roofs, the soldier traced it to the poplar. The *Subedar* was informed about the tree which was to be felled. He had the felling stopped. Indeed, a crow secured justice at the hands of Col. Mian Singh, so said the admiring people.

The *Subedar* was as stern in the dispensation of justice as he was sagacious. He would, unlike his predecessors in office, himself go round the City. On a visit, he inspected the boat of a *Hanji* in which was stored the paddy that the government sold to the people at reduced rates. The Colonel dipped his hand in river water and thrust it deep into the paddy. On taking it out, he found that a lot of dirt had stuck to his hand. (The *Hanji* had adulterated paddy with earth and sand.) He had the hands of the *Hanji* cut on the spot. Deterrent punishment could not be more exemplary.

On another occasion, he accosted a woman, carrying a load of rice which she had purchased from a grain-seller. He got it weighed and found it much less. He had the nose of the shop-keeper cut for weighing with counterfeit weights.

The beginning of 1836 A.D. heralded a severe winter in the Valley. Nature expressed the worst of her wrath on the people, when the

* Reference to Solomon's justice.

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terrible winter was followed by rain that fell continuously for forty days. The young crops were swept away. The dams and canals, that were blocked up during the (mis-)rule of earlier *Subedars*, served no purpose to the starving farmers. The bridges of Khannabal, Bijibehara and Pampore, over the Jhelum, were swept down by the inundated waters. Frightened people were locked up in their homes as the water level rose to the very windows of their houses, unless they were carried away.

Once again, the resourceful Colonel proved equal to the occasion. He had the dams repaired and canals opened out: for their annual upkeep he founded a special grant. He knew well how to import thousands of maunds of grain from surplus areas of Northern India to relieve the folk that might otherwise have starved. The impending disaster was largely averted, chiefly owing to the energy and selfless solicitude of Col. Mian Singh for the people. When the Maharaja heard of this as well as how the Colonel had put down an insurrection of the chiefs of Muzaffarabad, he sent the Colonel a present of silver bracelets that Sikhs wear—a token of great esteem. (Five years ago, the Colonel had, similarly, received a fine horse, with silver-bridled accoutrements).

It had since become a daily routine for the Kashmiris to pray for the continuance of the governorship of the popular, loved and respected Colonel. They were pleased with the Settlement in which the Valley was divided into twenty-four *parganas* —units that were better administered and where the revenue was fixed anew in accordance with the latest figures of produce of the land. In his palace, opposite to Sher Garhi, people had free access to him. He would depute many Kashmiris as delegates to attend conferences and festive meetings held at Lahore. For the first time in modern history of Kashmir, a governor thus respected a grateful people. It was he who reorganised the shawl industry of Kashmir at an hour when it had suffered at the hands of the exploiting officials.

The French traveller, Vigne, who had painted a portrait of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and mapped Punjab, (the Land of Five Rivers), visited Kashmir. Col. Mian Singh gave him a royal reception and attended to his every want. On his behalf, Pandit Ganesh Das Ganju paid the monthly revenues and presented the shawls and other products of Kashmir to the Maharaja. The Maharaja would, consistent with his policy of not pampering any official, occasionally express dis-

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satisfaction with the accounts and so on — but he never even conceived the idea of changing the *Subedar*. Vigne, on his return, gave him an excellent account of the prosperity of Kashmiris.

In 1839 A.D., on the death of the Maharaja, Kharak Singh ascended the throne. He was the opposite of his father in many respects. His ways appealed little to Raja Dhyan Singh and his sons ar.d Naunihal Singh. The latter's intrigues hastened the death of Kharak singh. That, during all this time of internecine warfare in the Punjab, there was peace in Kashmir, is borne out by the fact that Kharak Singh, shortly before his death in 1840 A.D., deputed Col. Mian Singh to suppress an uprising of tribal chiefs in Hazara. As Naunihal Singh died suddenly, Rani Chand Kaur, aided by Gulab Singh, was the regent for some months till Sher Singh occupied the throne.

These news of Lahore reached Srinagar after months. Khalsa and Punjabi army of Kashmir grew restive. Already they had a grudge against Col. Mian Singh for not giving them a free hand to loot the people of Kashmir as his predecessors had done. They rebelled under one Tarlok Singh and sent an ultimatum to the Colonel to accept their terms for better pay and rations on par with the troops of Lahore. While the Colonel considered their demands, they treacherously broke into his residence during the night (of 17th April, 1841 A.D.) and murdered him, hacking his body pitilessly.

After the horrible murder of the *Subedar* , his son, Sant Singh, along with the loyal forces, retreated to the fortress of Hari Parbat. After twenty-four days of hostility, Tarlok Singh was killed by one of his own men. Kashmir was in mourning all the while, at the loss of the good *Subedar*.

When Maharaja Sher Singh heard the sad news, he appointed Sheikh Imamud-Din as *Subedar* of Kashmir. Along with him, he sent Raja Gulab Singh and Prince Partap Singh. The Sheikh restored peace in Kashmir.

Life came back to normal in Srinagar and the rest of the Valley, but Kashmir had lost one of the ablest of administrators and the most loved of the *Subedars*.

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Wazir Zorawar

Gulab Singh (1792-1858 A.D.) rose to be a Raja from a ruling chief, and, finally, became the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir State in 1846. Much of his meteoric rise depended on his loyal generals, the most prominent among whom as Wazir Zorawar Singh. The great general has been characterised by many authorities as the finest soldier of Indian in the 19th century.

This conqueror of Ladakh and Baltistan and invader of Tibet recalls the To-the-horizons' expeditions of Lalitaditya, who subjugated and ruled over Tibet. In the time of Jahangir, and unsuccessful attempt had been made to conquer Tibet. Shah Jahan sent Zaffar Khan in 1634 A.D. at the head of an hastened back to the valley, owing to the approach of the severe winter of Tibet. Zorawar, however, never returned from Tibet.

Wazir Zorawar was a politician and soldier, rolled into one. His exploits are remembered and spoken of in the Frontier districts of Kashmir by young and old, men and women. Rajputs of Jammu are justly proud of this intrepid general. His story reads like a chapter from the *Odyssey*...

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13

Wazir Zorawar

With his confidant, Detwan Amir Chand, Gulab Singh planned the expedition. He discussed every detail for nothing must escape his vigilant attention. The management of the commissariat interested him very much. True to Rajput traditions, he fed and clothed his army well.

The usher bowed himself in a announced a soldier who had come with sealed letters from Reasi. Gulab Singh looked at the soldier, a tall, stalwart, handsome Dogra Rajput. He had noticed him before. He liked him and his smart bearing. The Dewan opened and read out the letters to the Dogra chief. One of the letters referred to the problems of the commissariat which were growing knotty at the time.

"What shall we do with the organisation of the commissariat?" said Gulab Singh. "There is so much waste".

The soldier, who awaited orders, a yard or so away, boldly intervened, "Sire, allow me to say a word about the commissariat. For years I have watched the great waste. I have a scheme to tackle the complex problem successfully. Shall I speak about it?"

"Yes, yes," allowed the Rajput chief, "take your seat on the carpet and let us have your ideas".

In the most lucid manner, the soldier first outlined and then described his scheme of the better organisation of the commissariat. Gulab Singh was impressed.

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"What is your name and wherefrom do you come?" he asked.

" My name is Zorawar Singh. I am a native of Kassel, near Reasi. So far I have served as a private".

The name, Zorawar, a manly name befitting the broad-shouldered Dogra soldier, was familiar to Gulab Singh. His grandfather, whom he had settled on his estate of Ramgarh, bore the name. He thought over the scheme and considered it worth a trial.

After consulting the wise and devoted Dewan, he gave Zorawar a letter, in which he empowered the commandant of Reasi to try the scheme with his infantry. The scheme was tried and found eminently successful. Gulab Singh, who was the only chief of Jammu whom Maharaja Ranjit Singh had allowed to maintain his own army, gave several promotions to Zorawar Singh.

In the battles of the Sikhs against the Pathans, Gulab Singh greatly distinguished himself and received more Jagirs from the Sikh Maharaja. In 1815 A.D., Reasi, so far administered by Gulab Singh, was given to Mian Dewan Singh as Jagir by the Maharaja. Gulab Singh, who was ambitious to consolidate the divided principalities of Jammu under his own suzerainty, could ill brook this award. Benefitting from the absence of Dewan Singh, he sent his forces, under Zorawar Singh, to occupy *Resai*. The neighbouring chiefs, who were jealous of Gulab Singh's meteoric rise at the Sikh Durbar, did not help him.

Dewan Singh besieged the fort of Reasi. Zorawar Singh was in a precarious position for some time, but—the born soldier that he was—he did not lose heart at all. His system of commissariat helped him a great deal in keeping up the morale of the garrison. Dewan Amir Chand sent him reinforcements from Jammu. He held his own against Dewan Singh in the face of great odds, and, in the end, defeated him.

On his return from the war against tribal chiefs, Gulab Singh sent an expedition to Kishtwar in 1821 A.D. He raised Zorawar to the rank of a commandant and gave him independent charge of the commissar-

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iat. Aided greatly by the influence which his brother, Raja Dhyan Singh, wielded at the Lahore Durbar as the Lord Chamberlain, to which post he had been appointed in place of Jamadar Khushal Singh, Gulab Singh was left free to try his army against the neighbouring hilly principalities.

In 1822 A.D., Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself performed the *Rajtilak* ceremony of Gulab Singh and crowned him the Raja of Jammu with the saffron tilak and the formal bunch of saffron flowers. The Raja was barely thirty and he had already subjugated Reasi, Kishtwar, Rajouri and Ramgarh, as *Jagirs*. In diplomacy and statecraft, he was almost equal to Pandit Dina Nath, the reputed "Colbert of the Punjab". Inspiring faithfulness and loyalty in his associates and soldiers, he had devoted men like Wazir Lakhpat, the former Wazir of the Raja of Kishtwar, Dewan Jwala Singh Sahi—the son of Dewan Amir Chand—and Zorawar Singh, in his employ.

Gulab Singh had realized his ambition of uniting the hilly principalities of Jammu under his hereditary rule, like his great ancestor, Raja Ranjit Dev, but he wasn't satisfied. He was bent on widening his territories as much as he could. Nothing daunted him in the enterprises, for his physical and moral courage was great.

The petty Raja of Chenani had become Raja Gulab Singh's feudatory, prior to the Raja's expedition to Kishtwar. Gulab Singh and his generals saw the Valley of Kashmir from the Himalayan ranges over Chenani and desired very much to annex it. This they could not do, at least not very soon for Kashmir was directly administered by the Sikhs through the Subedar, Col. Mian Singh. For years, Gulab Singh's army fought down tribal uprisings or the revolt of one petty Raja or the other.

In 1834 A.D., Gulab Singh and his Wazir, Dewan Jwala Singh, took the momentous decision to attack and annex the frontier districts of Kashmir, which were not administered by the Sikh Governor. Ladakh

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and Baltistan were fixed as the targets of the Dogra Army, under the command of Zorawar Singh, who was now a general.

Ladakh was ruled by a Tibetan chief who owed allegiance to the Grand Lama. This rocky and sandy country, bounded on the north by the Karakaram Pass and on the west by Gilgit and Astore, situated on an average height of over 12,000 ft above the sea level, had not known an invader from the 15th century downwards. No Chenghis Khan or Mohammad Ghaznavi would dare come up as far in a region of intense freezing cold, surrounded by snow-clad peaks of twenty-five to twenty eight thousand feet height. The vegetation is sparse there and only Ladakhis knew how to keep themselves warm - and kicking with sheepskins, in spite of scarcity of fuel and timber.

To this land Zorawar Singh and his forces crossed from Kishtwar, after Raja Gulab Singh, on confidential enquiry from the East India Company, ascertained the concurrence of the British in the proposed expedition. Zorawar's forces took Purig, the capital of Kartse, by surprise. There was little opposition to the Dogras. To keep the rear undisturbed Zorawar Singh left a small Dogra garrison in the conquered fort and then proceeded further. The path lay over the most difficult terrain. The rocky track flanked the deep roaring Suru river whose water looks black. Many ponies slipped down the ravines and were flung into the mad waters.

The Ladakhis of a neighbouring district gathered and gave battle. They were again defeated on the plain of Pushkum. The fierce and relentless winter of these parts was about to set in. Zorawar, desirous of camping in a less cold place, Lankartse, started negotiations but the Ladakhis would not respond. Their guerilla warfare proved ineffective against the Dogras who were well entrenched.

When the severe winter was over, Zorawar attacked the Ladakhi camp and encountered little resistance by the enemy who fled to Leh. Ladakhis, mostly Buddhists, were not soldiers of the calibre of the neighbouring district of Baltistan, where the people, though of the same Mongolian stock, were militantly organised Muslims. Tsepal,

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the old King of Ladakh, was utterly demoralised. He met Zorawar at Bazgo the settle terms of surrender. He agreed to be a titular king in the name of Raja Gulab Singh, paying an annual tribute of Rs. 20,000, over and above the huge indemnity that he paid on demand.

The Dogra army then camped in Lamayiru, where the climate was slightly warmer. The Sikhs were envious of the quick rise of Gulab Singh and his brother, Raja Dhyan Singh, at the Lahore Durbar, and the former's successful conquests. Their Kashmir Governor, Col. Mian Singh, engineered a revolt of Ladakhis against the Dogra army of occupation. They wiped out the Dogra garrison posted in Suru.

Zorawar Singh, like an adept general, took time by the forelock and hastened to Leh, in spite of the advancing winter and snow over the passes, that had almost closed them. He gave deterrent punishment to the rebels and, posting his agent with the King and reinforcing all his garrisons, went back to Jammu to spend the rest of the winter and to confer with Gulab Singh. The Raja was highly pleased with the successes, absolute honesty and fearlessness of his general, who accepted a small pay just enough for his and his family's wants. He put on the clothes that the Raja gave him and would continue using them till they were worn threadbare. The Raja had better uniforms prepared for him and for Col. Basti Ram, who was his second in command as well as the chronicler of these famous campaigns which made history. The Raja conferred the title of Wazir on General Zorawar Singh.

In 1836 A.D., the indefatigable Zorawar appeared on the scene to fight Tsepal who was instigated by Sikhs in Kashmir to the repudiation of Dogra suzerainty. Zorawar dethroned him and installed Stanzan, a cousin of Tsepal, in his place. Before trekking back to Jammu, Zorawar posted a strong garrison in Leh where the fortress was reinforced. Next year, on his annual expedition to Ladakh, Zorawar found the roles of the king and the rebel reversed. Stanzan was now at the head of a rebellion. Zorawar deposed Stanzan and placed Tsepal once again on the throne on increased tribute.

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Maharaja Ranjit Singh died in 1839 A.D. Gulab Singh, Dhyan Singh and his sons, were involved in the affairs of the Lahore Durbar. Anarchy prevailed in Lahore and the rest of the Punjab. Gulab Singh, however, found time to go to Jammu and to plan expeditions to the Frontier and other turbulent districts with Dewans and generals, most prominent among whom was Zorawar.

During the winter of 1840 A.D., Sukamir rose to be a leader of Ladakhis. He collected the frustrated warriors and led them in a final attempt to throw off the Dogra yoke. Zorawar stormed Ladakh with fresh and strong forces in the spring. With a firm hand and indomitable will, he suppressed the rebellion. The tale of the public execution of Sukamir is even now on the lips of Ladakhis. They say Sukamir was thrown into a trench and earth was filled about him so that his head remained out. Then a large nail was driven with hammers in his head. The horrified people were finally conquered.

Next, Zorawar directed his expedition to Baltistan, which was ruled by the Sultan of Skardu. Zorawar was well versed in diplomacy and stratagem: his settlements proved the former and his warfare, the latter. Mohammad Shah, the son of the Sultan, aspired to the throne of Skardu. Aided by the forces of Mohammad Shah and King Tsepal, Zorawar Singh attacked Skardu and conquered the fort. He enthroned Mohammad Shah. As usual, he left a unit of Dogras in the fort.

The Napoleonic general was not satisfied with these conquests which had already secured him undying fame. He decided to invade Tibet, whose hard climate had repelled invaders for centuries ever since Emperor Lalitaditya conquered the country. Marching up the Indus in May, 1841 A.D, General Wazir Zorawar Singh conquered Rudok and Garo. Dogras encamped on the banks of the lake of Mansarovar and prepared themselves for the final attack on Central Tibet. Zorawar sent a letter to the King of Tibet through an emissary. Written in a friendly tone, the letter warned the King against the advance of the British power and offered him the hand of friendship of the ruler of Kashmir. The Tibetan monarch's army numbered not more than five thousand; it consisted mostly of Ladakhi and Balti recruits who were trained on the outskirts of the lake. Advancing into

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the country, Zorawar encamped at Tirthapuri, while Col. Basti Ram was stationed at Takla Gor on the frontier of Nepal. At those places, they intended to spend the extremely severe winter of Tibet. Their calculation was that the Lhasa army would not dare to fight them during winter.

For once Zorawar Singh's forecast turned out to be wrong. The consequences were, fatal.

In mid-winter a strong Lhasa force, that far outnumbered Zorawar's men, marched upon them. Zorawar did not think of surrender, not even in the face of calamity. He attacked the advancing enemy. The battle that ensued lasted three days. On the third day, the valiant general was wounded by a bullet and, though he fought like a lion even after this, "a Tibetan warrior pierced him through the breast with his lance".

Braving great disadvantages, the Dogras had advanced into the heart of Tibet, where the battlefield was upwards of 15,000 feet above the sea level, under their intrepid general, Zorawar Singh, who led these expeditions six times. They fought in "mid-winter, when even during the day the temperature never rises above the freezing point and the intense cold of the night can only be borne by people well covered with sheepskins and surrounded by fires. For several nights the Indian troops had been exposed to all the bitternesses of the climate. Many had lost the use of their fingers and toes, and all were more or less frost-bitten... On the last fatal day not one half of the men could handle arms".

The British government on hearing of Zorawar's invasion of Tibet, did not favour the expedition. Through Maharaja Sher Singh, Raja Gulab Singh was asked to call his forces back from Tibetan territories. Before the despatches were received, disaster had overtaken Zorawar and his army.

When Gulab Singh came to know that only 1,000 soldiers were saved, he, not losing heart, sent better equipped reinforcements under Dewan Hari Chand and Wazir Tatanu to aid Col. Basti Ram who had

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survived the disaster. The Dogras found the Tibetans strongly entrenched in forts. They dammed a river and flooded them out of their positions. After a brief battle, the Lhasa forces were defeated. Their commander was taken prisoner and executed on the spot. A treaty was signed between the Lhasa Government and Raja Gulab Singh.

Though the expedition was a failure, yet it and the previous conquests of the Frontier districts of Kashmir immortalised General Wazir Zorawar Singh, who was the greatest soldier that Jammu had produced and, indeed, "the finest Indian general of the 19th century."

Apart from his honesty and integrity and his wonderful management of the commissariat, he had many peculiarities. " He never used to send despatches of any kind about his expeditions. The tributes and revenue collected were sent down post haste to Jammu, and the Raja had to discover from it what new country his general had conquered. By these conquests he and his family did not benefit to the extent of a single penny". His name is still a bogey to children in the Frontier districts of Kashmir where the people also admire the unexampled bravery of this intrepid general.

Remembered in Folk-song

Zorawar Singh is also a legendary figure in Ladakhi folklore. The Ladakhis sing a song of Zorawar's wife, whom they believe to have accompanied her husband to Ladakh. She had to return alone across the Zoji-la Pass. In the song, Urdu words are mixed in a quaint way with the Tibetan:

I do not wish to eat bread received from the sinful northerners,
Amidst the inhabitants of this land I have no friends and relations;.

In the northern plain I have no brothers and friends,

In the place of friends and relations I had only Zorawar.

And it was only Zorawar who made me a despised widow.

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And it was only Zorawar who made his queen a despised widow.

When arriving at the Zoji Pass, my fatherland can be seen;

When arriving on the Zoji Pass, Lahore and the Punjab can be seen.

Although I can see my fatherland, I shall not arrive there;

Although I can see my fatherland, Zorawar's queen will not arrive there.

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Robin Hood of Kashmir

An altogether different theme awaits the reader in this tale. The romantic title stands for Mahadev, a Kashmiri Pandit thief, who lived during the reign of Maharaja Pratap Singh (1885-1925 A.D.) In intriguing circumstances, this Robin Hood, who boldly robbed the rich to feed and clothe the poor and the destitute, makes two appearances in the court of the Maharaja, who was as indulgent as he was noble and just.

The 'Miaw' tactics of *Mahadev the Cat* are of absorbing interest. Featured amongst 'The World's Strangest Stories" by *Evening News*, London, in 1957-58, the story appeared in over 50 countries, including India (*Times of India*, Bombay). The prominent incidents of the life of Mahadev, who has since become the hero of popular lore, have been recorded in the tale....

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Robin Hood of Kashmir

"Miaow! Miaow!" she heard the soft, repeated cry of the cat. Half awake, she discerned it was not the usual sound of the cat that disturbed her light sleep every night. A different cat had come into the house. Never before did another cat trespass there. How could it be?

She sat up in her bed, her bed clothes strewn about her. Alone, all alone in the house, she felt afraid somehow. What was that? A soft step on the floor that creaked slightly. Her heart beat fast, faster than ever. Could it be a thief, who had blundered into this house of poverty?

Yes, a dark form crossed her.

"Thief! Thief! Help!" she tried to shout but her words died within her. Her throat suddenly grew parched. For her life she could not pronounce the words. What use would that be?

Her neighbours would not hear her. They were so distant, across the alleyway. Collecting herself, as best as she could, she blurted out, timorously, weakly, "Who are you, there?"

"It is I, Mahadev", the shadow replied. "Calm yourself, I shall do you no harm. But tell me where is Shridar Bhat?"

So that was it, she thought rapidly. Mahadev, the famous thief, who is good to the poor and who fleeces the rich, had traced Shridar Bhat, her distant uncle, who lived with them whenever he came from the village to transact business in Srinagar. Mahadev was after that rich miser's hoarded wealth. She had heard that Mahadev was noble and virtuous.

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She replied, " Shridar Bhat went to the village yesterday. I guess he must have reached there". Composing herself, she added, "Mahadevji, now leave this house. I am alone here".

"But why are you alone?" he demanded with hurt innocence.

"My mother has gone to a neighbour's house where a marriage is to be celebrated tomorrow. She went there to lead the chorus songs. She is good at that. They will pay her something, I suppose. She must be coming back any moment."

"Is there no one else in the house?" asked the sympathetic voice of the thief, whose dark, lean form noiselessly settled on the old mat.

"I am an orphan, the only child"—a sigh escaped her—"besides, my mother is mad after marrying me off-" Her words trailed off. She found it difficult to proceed.

"My daughter", said the encouraging voice, "tell me all about that. I shall help you."

But excess of emotion choked her, as it were. Tears ran down her invisible cheeks. She tried to suppress her cries. It was of no avail. He repeated his words, ever so gently. The helpless orphan was touched deeply by this paternal show of affection.

"My mother is old. She is bent on having my betrothal performed with an old man, who has already lost his teeth and his three wives. He is rich. He will pay her one thousand rupees for me and he will arrange the wedding on our side. It is too bad.

"I tell my mother, `Kungmali, think a little'. She only retorts, `Tara, it is none of your business. Forget all about Anand, that poor boy, whose great grandfather was a tailor. You must be married in a big family. You will have servants'. She goes on with that sermon. She is after the one thousand rupees which would give her security for the rest of her years. Shridar Bhat is our rich relative but he only throws a rupee or so at us after an interval of months. What can we do...?"

Mahadev stopped her, saying, " I understand all. Tell me when is your betrothal due?"

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"In about three months"

The words hardly left her when she found that the dark form vanished like a ghost. Somewhere, from the street, after a few dazed moments, she heard "Miaow!" several times.

Was it a dream, she wondered?

In right royal oriental style, the Dogra Maharaja of Kashmir held his court in his Jhelum view palace. The Wazirs squatted on the raised dais on either side of him. Behind him stood, like statues, two body-guards holding the gorgeous gold-laced umbrella over his crown, poised a little above his heavy, fluffy turban, in comparison with which the crown appeared a small inconspicuous thing. The Maharaja was inclined to be humorous. The Dogra and Kashmiri courtiers, reflecting his moods, took the cue and talked among themselves a little louder than usual. Several liveried servants, crouching on their knees, kept up the flame of the *chilum* of the *hooka*. The Maharaja smoked idly through the long rubber pipe, the latest western novelty shown off in the durbar.

"Who is this Mahadev that our Wazirs talk much about?" said the Maharaja, pointing Dewan Danpat Ram—the Dogra police chief of the City of Srinagar, who maintained the best traditions of the Dogras in his administration—with the stem of his pipe, for an answer.

There was a momentary pause as the Maharaja for the first time talked openly about a popular subject. A hush fell upon the durbar.

What would the newly-appointed inspector general of police say, thought every courtier? They envied his quick rise to the coveted post. But they all knew all about his incorruptible uprightness and unexampled integrity which went ill with the department that he was bossing.

"Sire," replied Dewan Danpat Ram, standing up from his seat, and bowing, " many rumours have reached me for the last year about a reported thief, Mahadev. It is said that he acts the cat while he steals. When his motions of house-breaking make the least sound in the night,

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he imitates the cry of a cat and says, `Miaow! Miaow!' (suppressed laughter from the courtiers, who were encouraged to laugh more, as they expertly read a humorous twinkle in the opium-filled royal eyes) and that lulls the people in the house to sleep. This, I am told, he does perfectly. But never so far has any one caught him at it in the night. He is a well-known and respectable Kashmiri Pandit in the City." Again, there was laughter, this time starting from the Maharaja himself, who was unusually amused.

"Let me admit, Sire, I have seen Mahadev", went on the fierce-looking inspector general of police, "He is a small wiry man, with catlike eyes"(guffaws from the court)— "hollow-cheeked and very modest in his demeanour. He wears several holy rosaries round his neck and paints a saffron caste mark on his forehead. His flowing *pheran* is spotlessly clean".

"Well, well, Dewan," interrupted the Maharaja, "We're not interested in those nice details," (malicious laughter from the courtiers), "we want to know why you have not so far brought to book such a criminal?"

Not allowing the Dewan to reply, a Wazir put in, "Sire, only yesterday my friend, Pandit Prakash Kaul, lost five hundred rupees from his safe. The gate-keepers and he himself heard `Miaow' cries in the night. Surely, Sire, it was Mahadev. He is a wizard and sends people to sleep with his cat calls".

But another Wazir corrected him, as he always did, and said, bowing profoundly, "Sire, I know from reliable sources that Mahadev the Cat, as he is called, is a very religious man. He is even a great philanthropist. He supports many orphans and widows. He finances an Ashram in Sad-i-Malun, whereto he goes every month on the eighth day of the lunar fortnight. I can prove all this, with definite evidence".

One of the Wazirs added, "Sire, allow me to add that I have seen with my own eyes, Mahadev performing sacred *havana* ceremony at the foot of Hari Parbat.

"Sheikh Karim, the Imam of Mokdum Sahib's mosque, which flanks a side of the hillock, came to meet him there and Mahadev donated him a big sum for the repair of the mosque, in my presence. Who has not heard of the Ashrams in the woods that are run by him, Your Highness?"

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These revelations mystified the courtiers and made the Maharaja— one of the most religious of Dogra rulers of Kashmir—think a little. The contradicted Wazir bit his lip and looked away from the court. The Maharaja pointed the Dewan for his answer.

He made courteous reply, "Sire, I have to say publicly and before your benign presence that the law of the land does not empower me to start arresting otherwise respectable citizens on the merest suspicion. I must have tangible proofs against a reported thief so that I may start the machinery of law against him".

The Maharaja, a pious and God-fearing man that he was, nodded at this. Thus heartened, the police chief went on, "Sire, for one full year, ever since I took charge of the City Police Lines, I have laboured to find proof against Mahadev. Mere panicky news of his `Miaow, Miaow' tactics do not compel me to take him in my custody".

The Maharaja mused for some time. The court was instantly silent. He broke the silence with "Dewan, could we see this Mahadev?"

"Sooner said than done, Sire. Mahadev lives near the palace and spends the day in a Sadhus' Ashram, beside the Raghunath Temple".

Dewan Danpat Ram left, bowing.

Excited conversation, all about Mahadev the Cat, prevailed in the Court.

The usher came in, bowing three times and addressed the Maharaja, "Your Highness, Dewan Danpat Ram has come back with a Pandit and seeks admittance to the royal presence".

"Let them in", allowed the Maharaja, in the conventional way.

Dewan Danpat Ram entered, bowing, followed by a Kashmiri Pandit, dressed in a spotless Kashmiri *pheran*, over which he wore a chocolate-coloured Kashmiri shawl, a small man, quite ordinary looking, with brilliant cat eyes.

"Is he Mahadev the thief?" said the Maharaja, a tinge of sarcasm obvious in his tone.

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"Yes, Sire", said the Dewan, and other courtiers, almost in a chorus.

They had hardly finished when, Mahadev fixing his stern eyes on the Maharaja said, "Sire, Your Highness is our father and mother. Father and mother do not give their children names unless the erring youngsters deserve them. Your Highness has called me a thief; unless Your Highness is sure that I am one, Your Highness as our father and mother may not call me one".

The polite rejoinder was firmly spoken, between set teeth. For the first time, the Maharaja was openly contradicted by a commoner. The courtiers held their breath in suspense, but the good Maharaja did not lose his temper. He secretly liked the boldness of the reply, though he did not show it.

Over a puff he said to Mahadev, "Yes, but we have heard that you are a thief".

"Idle tell-tales, Your Highness, can float any rumour. They should believe what they see with their own eyes".

The enemies of Mahadev—and there were many such in the court—took it that he was doomed, now that he had gone thus far. But, to their chagrin, the brow of His Highness showed no clouding frown. He only dropped his *hooka* pipe stem impatiently and said, slowly, calculatingly, "Mahadev, you're very clever".

"Sire", replied Mahadev, "Your Highness cannot cut off my head for my being clever. Perhaps I am. I may even take off a man's pyjamas and if he can't catch me taking it away from his legs, he can't catch me and have me punished for it".

"Is it ? Try that with us and we'll know that you are not bragging before the royal presence."

"What if I do, Your Highness ?" The courtiers were now shocked. The Maharaja was getting too indulgent, they all whispered to one another. But even a Maharaja has his whims.

"We will reward you ten thousand rupees."

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"Your Highness, I shall do so this night."

"And, if you don't succeed?"

"Sire, tomorrow I shall be present in Your Highness' court. If I succeed, reward me ! If I fail, hang me in this very durbar hall."

There was a great commotion, as, taking his leave, Mahadev the Cat left the hall.

"Mahadev brother", admonished his sister, Gauri. "It is impossible to do what you intend to. Consider a while".

Mahadev looked vacantly at his confidante. No one else knew of his daring ventures in advance. She was intelligent and she gave him wise counsel.

Years back when he needed money badly for his charity, and he planned to visit, the house of Khwaja Ghulam Rasool — the city contractor who paid a coolie at the rate of two pice a day — it was she who had suggested that he must know the name of his personal servant and acquaint himself with his voice. That had actually helped. When the Khwaja, half asleep, had asked, " Who are you there?" Mahadev had at once said, "It is Qadira, sir. I am filling your *kangri* with charcoal."

Yes, the Khwaja had suspected nothing. Everything had been all right. But this time she, his sagacious sister, was baffled. He was thinking hard and he hit upon an idea.

"I have it, sister Gauri! The Palace gutter that opens out near the palace ghat is wide enough to admit me. Then to luck!"

After a brief pause, when he mentally passed through many moments of the coming fateful night, he said, "Now it is my *Puja* time. I must be off".

His *Puja* room was unconventional. There were no pictures of gods and goddesses in it. Nor were there any miniature images of stone gods pressed ramshackle in a private *Puja* temple. There was but

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one Siva idol, smooth and beautiful, over a graceful tripod. He concentrated on the idol.

No, it was not easy to focus his scattered thoughts. The day had been ominous. The Maharaja had called him "Mahadev Thief". Was he a thief?

The general rule was that the rich robbed the poor openly and exploited them by all possible means. He was doing the contrary. He emptied the haves of their surplus, ill-gotten gains and gave that to the poor in the city and in the jungle Ashrams. The memory of the favourite Sad-i-Malun Ashram and its simple associates tormented him. How could he go back there unless he settled his affairs in the City for good? At the moment he was somewhat out of means. He wanted one thousand rupees for Tara's mother, and especially to save Tara. She simply must not be married to that rich dotard.

Middle age was fast developing into old age. He must give up his trade not because it was bad because his body was the less supple now. The other night when he climbed the third storey of Pandit Prakash Kaul's house over the structure raised over a well, his body was almost broken when he scaled the dizzy top and jumped therefrom to the verandah. The coming night would decide his life. If he succeeded with the Maharaja his honour would be upheld. And he would get the big reward.

The calculation relieved the tension of his brain. By habit he concentrated on the stone god. He was lost in contemplation and heard not the chirping of mynas and sparrows on the nearby mulberry tree. In the blissful state, he somehow realised that all would be well. Coming to, his fears persisted. But he soon gained control of himself as he went to the living room to have a scantly meal.

After the evening meal, served by his house-keeper sister—for he was bachelor of the *Sanyasi* type—he rested for hours. Finalising his plan over his *hooka*, he felt better. Tara's sad image popped up before his mind's eye. He had hardly seen her in the night. He did not know how, but he could picture Tara's plaintive form. He massaged his spare limbs with Kashmiri oil. Then he put on a special shirt and belted *salwar*, falling to the knees, soiled with oil and dirtied with use. The belt carried several things. Over it he donned his round *puggree* and *pheran*.

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He looked at the palace from across the slow-moving bosom of the Jhelum. It was about midnight. The dark river flowed noiselessly. Boatmen were asleep in their *Doonga* boats. Near the ghat, *Mahadev* took off his *pheran* and turban and placed them behind a flower vase. Softly he waded down the steps and swam across the river. He swam as nearly straight across the river as it was possible for an expert swimmer to do. Near the Palace ghat he did not at once come out of the water. He knew that the Maharaja had taken the challenge seriously and that a king does not like to be outwitted. There must be extra armed guard round the Palace. He swam down with the current to a point where the Palace gutter opened out into the river. It was wide enough to admit his wiry body, he had calculated, and it contained water only when the courtyard of the Inner Palace, to which it was connected underground, was watered.

Creeping through it like a cat, Mahadev groped his way into the inner courtyard. He knew where the Maharaja slept that night. To allow the summer breeze in, the window of the chamber was open. Walking about on all fours — for a sentry stood guard a few yards away — Mahadev noiselessly drew his rope-ladder from his belt and threw it up. The sentry did not see the dark form ascending to the chamber.

Stealing a look into the royal sleeping room, Mahadev did not at once step in. He saw in the dim candle light that the Maharaja was sound asleep. He heard the sentry pacing outside in the verandah.

Taking his sure chance, he leaped in without making any sound, and he hid himself under the bedstead of the Maharaja. There, he pulled out a reed from his belt. He had hollowed it and had corked it with flour paste, after filling hundreds of live ants in it. Uncorking the reed at both ends, he blew it at one end several times, directing the other end under the raised quilt of the Maharaja so that the ants poured on this legs. Mahadev ducked in under the bedstead to await results!

The Maharaja grew restless as Mahadev could well discern from under the bedstead. From the movements above him, Mahadev understood that the Maharaja was ungirdling his pyjamas. He made sure that the Maharaja was doing so in sleep. Snatching his opportunity, he came out from his ignoble ambush to deftly take out the pyjamas from the Maharaja's legs. Again, he ducked in under the bedstead where he fastened the precious pyjamas in his belt. He let the emptied reed remain under the bed in lieu of the booty! His rope-ladder awaited

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him. The sentry hardly noticed him nor did he seem to mind the "Miaow" which was, as usual, perfectly natural.

Three months passed away.

The *Dewankhana* of Pandit Suraj Kak Mattoo was gaily peopled with Brahmins, poor relations and other hangers-on, on a Sunday afternoon. The morning meal was being served in silver-worked Kashmiri high-edged plates. Each diner had several brass cups round his plate. They drank water from tumblers of the best silver-work designs.

According to Kashmiri custom, they squatted round a stretched woollen piece on which the plates were laid by the careful though ill-dressed and dirty-looking servants. Pandit Suraj Kak Mattoo, the well-known philanthropist and social reformer and the biggest Kashmiri Pandit *Rais*, sat at the head. Leisurely talk went on.

Addressing Mahadev, his old friend, Pandit Mattoo said, "What will you have, Mahadevji? You're such a frugal eater."

"Thank you, sir", replied Mahadev courteously, for he was an adept at dinner manners. "I am contented. The dinner is excellent".

It was a replica of the kings's court. The *Dewankhana* might well have been a palace chamber for all its exquisite frescoes, the Moghul papier mache patterns on the ceiling, the soft Persian carpets, the ancient woodwork of the almirah, the life-size family portraits and an old and impressive painting of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin "the Badshah". Courtly etiquette did prevail here too and Pandit Mattoo used the royal `we' in his speech.

Seeing that Pandit Sahib was interested in Mahadev, an old Brahmin said, " Pandit Mattoo Sahib, Mahadevji does not act the cat only. He plays the singer and dancer as well. So he eats less to keep light."

"How is that, we never heard of that stunt?" said Pandit Suraj Kak, in between asking other guests what they wanted and making them have more *Roganjosh*, and mutton curry.

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"Sir, the other day, Mahadev, disguised as a singing eunuch, led chorus songs at a wedding", the Brahmin informed, gulping down a big *Roganjosh* piece. He sang and danced so well that all the members of the house, including the cooks, crowded round him. At the climax of their interest, he boldly and slyly added, to the refrain of the song.

"Cat, say Miaow,
Mahadev, cry, Miaow,

"That was the agreed hint to his assistant, who broke open the chest of the Pandit Sahib, stealing several thousand rupees".

"Is it, Mahadevji? We did not hear of it earlier, as we were out on our Frontier tour. Did it happen before or after the Maharaja rewarded you ten thousand rupees for doing away with his pyjamas?"

"Sir", replied Mahadev, meekly, "it took place just a day after, when the whole city was astir with the big news. The money came in good time as I had to save Tara, the widow's daughter I talked to you about, from the clutches of the senile Pandit. It was a great pleasure to me to see her married to a young man, namely, Anand, whom I have settled in life as a clerk of an English friend of mine, who is a carpet dealer here. And then two temples had to be repaired and some other work had to be done".

A hanger-on, eating the last sweet dish, put in, "Sir, Mahadevji is shy. He has fixed lifelong sums upon the widows and the orphans he was supporting and he has created trusts for the jungle Ashrams. Keeping a sufficient sum for himself, he has now given up the cat trade."

There was a merry twinkle in the eyes of the host, as he said, "We are glad to hear all that. Really Mahadevji has carried on our social reform activities while we were away on tour. We will soon be retired from the several state offices that we are holding. Then we will devote ourselves wholly to the social reform of our community."

"I do not deserve all this praise, sir."

"We admire your philanthropic activities. We would ourselves finance some of your Ashrams but you know, lately we have been a little out of pocket."

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"Yes, sir, I know, in your yonder safe", Mahadev said, pointing out the safe in the wall, "there are seven thousand three hundred rupees, five thousand rupees, in a cup in the middle shelf and the rest in a gilded box".

The shocked guests looked askance at Mahadev. Pandit Suraj Kak eyed him humorously but surprise was writ large on every line of his aristocratic face.

"Mahadev, how do you know? We have heard that you have given up your night trade, though even then we were not angry with you. But we are your friends. How did you?..." Suraj Kak could not complete the sentence. His culture forbade him to use the obvious, unpleasant words.

Mahadev thought awhile and replied dramatically, "Suraj Kak Sahib, you are and always will be my friend. I have surely given up my profession. But yesternight I grew restless and went out for a stroll in the night.

"The open window of your *Dewankhana* attracted my attention. I thought it was an idea to jump up and to test your guards. This would be the last `house-breaking' as I am going to live permanently in my jungle Ashram of Sad-i-Malun. Well, I found, sir, that two men slept in this room. None awoke as I used my master key on your safe. One heard my 'Miaow' and, in his sleep, cried, 'Go away, cat!' Of course, I did not break my word. I only counted....".

A roar of applause from the guests drowned the rest of his words.

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Mujahid Sherwani

With the heroic tale of the martyr of 'New Kashmir', we enter the modern period of Kashmir, ushered after Independence, when the Valley, like the rest of northern India, went through a blood bath. A dedicated and active worker of the National Conference, Maqbool Sherwani, who had had a rub with Mr. Jinnah at Baramulla, his home town, faced the fury of the tribal invaders from Pakistan in the same town. After performing exploits of military strategy, he fell in the hands of the tribals on the fateful day, 7th November 1947, when they literally crucified him. Sherwani, a martyr to 'New Kashmir', is not dead.....: His blood liberated the soil on which it sealed for all time the silken bonds of unity binding the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of Kashmir—and the rest of India.

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Mujahid Sherwani

India came to the rescue of the people of Kashmir when the State was invaded by tribal hordes on the 22nd of October, 1947. Airborne Indian troops landed on the Srinagar aerodrome in the nick of time. The tribal and other Pakistan-inspired invaders were routed from the suburbs of Srinagar by the Indian troops and the National Militia of Kashmir. The raiders were driven out of Baramulla on the 8th of November, and later, pushed out of the Valley.

Speaking to the people of Baramulla on the 12th November, 1947, Prime Minister Nehru and Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah paid glowing tributes to the deeds of valour and consequent martyrdom of Mir Maqbool Sherwani, the hero of Baramulla. In several of his post-prayer speeches, Mahatma Gandhi movingly referred to Sherwani, who fought and died for his country, defending the great principle of intercommunal unity. The story of Sherwani became a beacon to the upholders of secular tradition of Kashmir and the rest of India.

Ever since the founding of the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference in 1939 by Sheikh Abdullah, Maqbool Sherwani had been a staunch supporter of the national cause of the forty lakhs of Kashmiris who demanded freedom from the Dogra monarchy. Sherwani was then a young man in his early twenties. He actually started taking part in the struggle of freedom when he was eighteen years old. He had seen much of the world about him even as a boy. Several times he had trekked to India whither he had run away from home. His mother died when he was a young child. His wife died in childbirth in the second year of their marriage. Sherwani was twenty-seven years at the time (1939), the year of the founding of the National Conference. He was

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free to do what he liked. He chose to serve his people. The choice was easy, for his doting father carried on a petty trade business in Barmulla and he did not have to work for a living.

As an active member of the National Conference, Sherwani popularised the demand for popular govèrnment and the necessity of communal harmony in the district of Baramulla, the goal defined by Sher-i-Kashmir* Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. He was guided by the older political worker of Baramulla, Sufi Mohammed Akbar. Both made the masses of the District politically conscious. Whenever the Wazir Wazarat (as the Deputy Commissioner was called) oppressed the rural folk or a corrupt revenue officer extorted bribes, or, a forest official exploited his authority, Maqbool Sherwani would stand up against the bureaucratic bully. He would organise the erstwhile oppressed and awed people and stage non-violent demonstrations; invariably, he and the people won their point.

Earlier, in his stormy boyhood, while Sherwani was the student of a middle school, he led his friends in folk dance and drama and other activities. That training was an asset to him. He became an effective speaker and he could sway and control large crowds. Defending his countrymen against the excesses of the bureaucracy, he would lead agitations of the aggrieved people. He was arrested several times. His being guided by the principles of the National Conference, as defined and popularised by 'Sher-i-Kashmir', provided him the right lead in every crisis—almost every time he scored a victory.

Sherwani had little respect for leaders who did not agree with the programme of the National Conference. When Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah visited Kashmir and spoke at Baramulla on his 'two-nation' theory, Sherwani forced him to come down from the platform, and this stopped his speech. The Muslim Conferencites, who had convened the meeting, were taken by surprise, and pursued Sherwani. To escape the fury of the mob, Sherwani jumped from the Baramulla bridge into the Jhelum and dived into the deep, eddying water, to reappear hundreds of feet away!

Sherwani coordinated the programme of the Baramulla branch of the National Conference with its parent body whose headquarters was

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* That is, 'Lion of Kashmir', the title conferred on the late Sheikh Abdullah by the people.

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at Srinagar. By tonga or lorry, on cycle or motor cycle, and, sometimes, on foot, Sherwani shuttled between Srinagar and Baramulla. When the momentous session of the National Conference was held at Sopore in September 1944, and the session ratified 'New Kashmir', the people's charter for freedom and self-government, Sherwani was indubitably the most active worker. He was well acquainted with Sopore; he knew almost every peasant by face. They co-operated with him in his round-the-clock work on the Reception Committee. At the session Sherwani heard and saw his beloved leader, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah as well as Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and many other Congress leaders. He dedicated himself, with renewed zeal, to the service of the land in order to usher 'New Kashmir', which received the sanction of the people in the open session. Thanks to his fond father, Sherwani could devote himself whole-heartedly to politics.

The struggle for full responsible government, as envisaged in the national document, entitled 'New Kashmir', assumed several forms. In 1945 the National Conference cooperated with the Government when certain reforms towards some popular representation in the Government were conceded. The Government's climbdown, however, soon turned out to be a tactical manoeuvre as the power was concentrated in the hands of Prime Minister R.C. Kak who was the nominee of the Maharaja. The National Conference, therefore, withdrew its representative from the Government. The Kak regime thereupon tightened its stranglehold over the people. The National Conference leaders sounded the clarion call of 'Quit Kashmir' agitation on the eve of the Cabinet Mission in India during May 1946. The Government retaliated harshly. An era of repression was ushered. The Conference leaders, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and others, including Sherwani, were placed behind the bars. Public opinion in India, as voiced by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders, was against the repressive policy of the Government. Mahatma Gandhi visited Kashmir. The Kashmir Government relented. In September 1946 the detenus were released unconditionally.

Again, there was a stalemate. The Maharaja of Kashmir was sitting on the fence, undecided whether the State should accede to India or Pakistan, after the Partition. A new and realistic policy was not announced at the right time after the exit of Kak as the Prime Minister. The hesitant policy of the Kashmir Government gave an initial advantage to the Pakistan-abetted tribesmen who came via the

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North-Western Frontier Province of Pakistan and invaded Kashmir in October 1947. Situated on the border, Muzaffarabad was the first town to fall. Like leaders of all branches of the National Conference, Sherwani responded to the call of the National Conference—whose leaders under the clarion call of Sheikh Abdullah had anticipated the trouble—to raise a body of 10,000 National Home Guards in the Valley.

As is apparent already, the story of Maqbool Sherwani cannot be extricated from that of the National Conference. He had identified himself with the activities of the party to which he owed selfless allegiance. While he was engaged with the organisation of the National Home Guards, he heard the disturbing news of the fall of Muzaffarabad. He witnessed panic spread in the town of Baramulla, as conflicting reports flew about the might and fury of the raiders. He spoke to the people at street corners and calmed their fears. The fifth columnists, were endeavouring to sabotage his efforts. Undeterred, Sherwani went on with his mission, working day and night at a hectic pace.

More disturbing news came about the lightning advance of the well-equipped raiders, who captured Uri and smaller towns. The incursion of the hordes into Baramulla appeared imminent. But Sherwani did not lose his nerve in the hour of gloom. He left Baramulla for Srinagar on his motor cycle at the very last hour after he had personally attended to the safe evacuation of a large part of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh population who thus escaped the indiscriminate fury of the vandals.

Sherwani conferred with the National Conference High Command. The leaders were alive to the peril to face which the National Home Guards and the National Militia had been raised. When the tottering machinery of the Maharaja's government failed, the leaders of the National Conference assumed the duties and powers of the Emergency Administration. The Headquarters were set up in the heart of the City. There was a keen element of precariousness in the situation. Nobody was sure of the morrow. What happened to Baramulla might befall Srinagar any moment. The Government of India heeded in time the appeal for help of the Kashmiri leaders. Srinagar was saved; the Indian troops, aided and guided by the National Militia, did a heroic job. The raiders were driven away from the doors of the loveliest city of India, which they would fain have depredated.

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Relieved at the turn of events, intrepid Sherwani plunged in the fight against the enemy, who revelled in heinous forms of butchery and sadism to women and children. He resolved to fight them on the propaganda front too; their slogan of 'Holy War' was a camouflage for an orgy of loot and bloodshed. To stop their infiltration in outlying districts of Srinagar, Sherwani made hurricane tours of Ganderbal, Safapore, Sumbal and other smaller towns, and told the people what these monsters really stood for. To the people he reiterated the necessity of intercommunal harmony. He warned them that they must not give shelter or show mercy to the unholy invaders, comprising freebooters and marauders, sent on the imperialist errand of annexing Kashmir and enslaving her people, even as earlier aggressors in history had done.

A glorious chapter of Sherwani's life commenced with this mission. It was the climax of a career of service to the country that will go down in the annals of Kashmir in letters of gold. Fearlessly, Sherwani ventured into Sopore, the devil's den, and nearby villages, where the tribal hordes had entrenched themselves. To hoodwink them, he carried aloft a Muslim League flag in his right hand and wore the blue crescent badge. He said to a leader of the tribesmen: "Wait not. March on. There is terrible communal trouble in the city of Srinagar. This is your opportunity to break in and set up your government in the Maharaja's Palace, on the banks of the famous Dal Lake. And, you'll have wine and women and gold!" He thus lured them to certain positions—as he had previously planned with the scouts of Indian troops and the National Militia—where they were shelled and bombarded by the Indian troops. This happened on 30th October, 1947, when Srinagar was in grave danger.

There are different estimates of the number of raiders who concentrated in this manner at certain points and whom Sherwani sent to their deserved doom. Some place it above two hundred. Be the figure what it may, suffice it to say, that bold Sherwani recklessly performed exploits of military strategy that contributed not a little towards saving Srinagar, and which vie with those of well-known spies in the two world wars of this century. He saved the lives of not only the inhabitants of Srinagar but hundreds of others of his countrymen and Indian troops.

How long could the lightning carrier of this youthful patriot last? Venturing into the bear's den once again, Sherwani fell into the hands

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of the tribesmen at Sumbal, a party of whom had laid waste the entire village. They had been looking for him for days. They had set a high price on his head—the fearless head of M.M. Sherwani.

The uncouth captors manhandled Sherwani. He flinched not, complained not. Acting under the orders of one of their Amirs, they escorted Sherwani to Baramulla. He was produced before an Amir whom the 'fifth columnists' had cited for the vendetta. "Tie the Kashmiri fellow to the verandah pillars", shouted the Amir.

Tied hand and foot, and feeling the ropes pressing him against the posts, and, staring at the street, Sherwani smilingly observed the Amir who sat in a chair by the roadside. Around the Amir, squatted or stood a platoon of the relentless, pitiless tribesmen, armed to the teeth.

"You are Sherwani", said the Amir, in a mocking tone. The tribesmen guffawed, gaping at the intrepid captive, whose demeanour and expression compelled attention.

"I am Mir Maqbool Sherwani", was the dauntless reply.

"Your age?"

"Thirty-five."

"We know much about you and your foul deeds," thundered the Amir. "You have betrayed us. You are false to the holy cause of the *Jehad*, that we wage". Softening a little, the Amir added, "You are a promising young man. You may live yet. We will forgive you if you forswear yourself and join us. As proof positive of your change of heart, you must tell us the secret position of the Militia and Indian troops in Shalteng and also show us the shortest route to the Srinagar aerodrome". "What may I do first ?" asked Maqbool Sherwani. His voice was calm and confident.

"Say *Islam Zindabad* and *Hindu-Muslim-ittehad Murdabad* ! No more fooling us now." "No, that shall not be", was the firm, tight-lipped reply of Sherwani, who was a rebel against reactionary authorities ever since his boyhood. "I only desire to say my last prayers".

"You will not offer prayers. You will say what we want you to say, or, we will make you to", threatened the ferocious Amir. "No, hundred

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times No", replied Sherwani. "I say *Naya Kashmir Zindabad! Sher-i-Kashmir Zindabad!*"

"What are you waiting for?" the Amir questioned his men.

No sooner was this said than they started belabouring the helpless captive with butt ends of their rifles. He bled but winced not.

The Amir who thought every Kashmiri to be a coward could not comprehend the tenacity of the prisoner. Set at naught, he said to one of his men, "This man is a traitor. Sever his nose and his tongue, if he still refuses." Sherwani repeated "No" and said the *Zindabads* over again, before his nose and tongue were cut off. What did Kashmir's hero look like?

The Amir wrote "Sherwani, the traitor, his punishment is death", on a piece of paper in Urdu and had it pasted on the forehead of Sherwani. Suddenly and unaccountably, the Amir flew into a rage and commanded twenty-four of his men to stand to the position of a firing squad.

"Fire and mark a crescent on the chest of the traitor", commanded the Amir. A volley of shots did the fanatic chore. Our martyr, the hero of New Kashmir, breathed his last. He died a martyr's death on the cross, as it were.

"Tie the ears of the traitor and his drooping head and arms straight to the posts so that every passer-by can see him," was the last bark of the Amir before he left the spot.

Little did the petty tyrant and his men realise that on the following day, i.e., 8th of November, 1947, they would be driven out like plagued rats from Baramulla. One of the first acts of the freed people was to reclaim the dead body of Mir Maqbool Sherwani and to bury it in the graveyard of Juma Masjid of the town with full military honours.

Sheikh Abdullah, and the leaders of Kashmir and India, paid touching tributes to the memory of the martyr of Baramulla. Sherwani is not dea. He will never die. By his glorious sacrifices, he has sealed the silken bonds of amity that bind the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of Kashmir and the rest of India.

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The National Cultural Front* of the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference staged a Kashmiri-cum-Hindustani play which depicted the heroic story of 'Martyr of New Kashmir'—the *Mujahid* who waged a 'holy war' in the best sense of the word. A lifesize portrait of Sherwani in the last pose was painted by the artists of the Front.

* The present author was associated with the Front.

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16
Black Jinn

The pine forest was rather thick. I held my breath, suspecting the least sound to proceed from a beast of prey. As often happens in a Kashmir forest, I emerged from the forest in a mountain meadow, a *marg*, as it is called. There I saw cow-boys playing a game.

"Let me be the Black Jinn" one boy, raising aloft his stick, said to the others. " I shall strike terror in you all".

"You mean you will play Charcoal Sanyasi," a pert urchin corrected him. "He is terrible!"

The play-acting boy draped himself in a black blanket, bent his back a little, leaned on a stick and peered out of a hole in the homespun. Laughing gleefully and feigning fear, the others ran away, shouting, "Ha to Allah! Black Jinn is come! Send thunderbolt on him, O Allah! or, he will eat us all alive".

Seeing me, they come to a standstill. My hiker's kit focused their attention. I had heard them and my curiosity was aroused.

"Who is the Sanyasi ? " I asked one of them.

"There he comes after us", he pointed the blanketed boy. Everybody laughed at this.

I was amused at the joke but I wanted to get at the truth. To win them over, I distributed toffees among them. Sucking the sweets, they looked strangely at me.

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"Now tell me where you heard about the Sanyasi?" I enquired. The mimicking boy stepped forth and made reply, "Sethji, we have not heard about but we have seen the Sanyasi whom we call Black Jinn. He lives in a stone temple over that *marg*".

"Take me to him", I said, "I shall give you more sweets." The boy agreed. He led me, giving the others a conscious look of superiority.

The small flower—bedecked *marg* was bordered by a patch of the forest. We crossed it and before us there opened out a larger *marg*, whose plateau-like ups and downs gave it the look of a terraced Moghul garden". There stood an old temple of stone and on one side of it there was a one-storeyed house. Both were in a dilapidated condition. The temple was a sad ruin though a tattered flag bearing the Swastika over its broken topmost pediment imparted to it the semblance of life. A lean dog half-heartedly barked at us.

There was a tumbledown kitchen in the rickety cottage. In another room several sheets were spread over a wooden cot. The skin of a leopard covered the hard spartan bed. A few pictures of gods and goddesses hung on the walls from which the mud plaster had fallen off. Taking in every detail, I had a good look at the room. I heard a cry from the boy.

"There, Sahib! the black Sanyasi is coming." The boy was really afraid; he crept nearer me.

What did I see? Approaching me was a jet black specimen of homo sapiens, the blackest living man that I had ever seen. From top to toe he was black as charcoal. His naked figure, clad in a loin cloth, was a mobile statue in black marble, so muscular, so polished, so grotesque. My heart somehow beat fast. The small boy ran away from me towards the temple to avoid a near sight of the Charcoal Sanyasi. I forgot the customary *namaste*, so much was I fascinated by his strange figure.

"*Namaste*, Babu Ji" the Sanyasi said. In confusion, I returned embarrassed greetings.

"Pray, sit down", he beckoned his cot. His voice was normal, even sweet. But his body! And, I observed to my mystification, that his teeth even were black. The whites of his eyes were dyed in the same pervasive hue. What a man!

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"Baba, wherefrom do you come ?"

"Haridwar", he pronounced the word in pure Sanskrit accent that bespoke learning.

"But you are so—"

"Black", he cut the short. "That is what every one says. I am awfully black, I know. I was not always so."

"Is that true?"

"Listen", the Baba started in the manner of the Ancient Mariner who has held many people rapt in attention with his strange tale. " I was the *chela* of a learned sage. We lived in the hoary Himalayas, on a much higher level than the well-known Badrinath Ashram. He had two more disciples. We subsisted on wild fruits. For many years I served my revered *guru*. And he grew fond of me.

"One day I strayed in the wood. I walked farther than I had done ever before. A fancy drove me on. Fresh spring was in the air and I did not want to go back. At a turning of the goat path, over a meadow like this one, I heard strange squeals. I was intrigued. Never had I heard a like sound. Quickening my steps, I followed the sound. In a depression of the meadow I saw a pair of elephants. The male elephant was making love to the female elephant. Theirs was a sportive spectacle to look at. In spite of my hermit life I looked on. A pebble was dislocated from my foothold. It fell towards the place where the beasts were having their amour. They espied me.

"The male elephant gave out a fierce yell. He rolled towards me in terrible wrath. I grew nervous and ran for my life. The elephant followed doggedly. I let go my wooden slippers and my overall and I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. I heard the sound of rocks and bushes being trampled under foot by the bulky beast. I did not dare to look back. I must escape with my life, I prayed. I hardly knew where I was running but I realised to my shock that the elephant was fast gaining on me. Where could I go? I thought of climbing a tree but the revengeful beast would surely root out the tree and crush me. How to save myself? was the question.

"I ran like a mad hare. I could almost feel the shadow of the terrible trunk of the elephant hovering over me. I was approaching a rocky

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mountainside and I calculated that I would scramble up the most steep slope so that the elephant may not be able to pursue me any more. To my great joy, I saw a hole in the mountainside. It was the mouth of a cave. I ran towards it for shelter. Bowing my head low, I walked in taking careful steps over the damp soil. I breathed relief. Looking back I saw the elephant shutting the mouth of the cave with his body. He screwed in his trunk and I recoiled towards a safe corner of the cave.

" A strange nauseating smile overpowered me. There was a blackish shining stone, a massive stone, in a corner as I could discern in the dim light, and it appeared to be moving and emitting the foul smell. I looked closer at it. To my horror I realised that it was a huge serpent. It must have weighed five maunds or more, for aught I know. Lifting its large head from the terrible coil, it hissed at the elephant. I did not see what it did but I wanted to cry away my horror.

"Words would not come to my parched throat. Who was there to listen to one who was literally between the devil and the deep sea? Terrible hissings were heard by me in a split second when I made a dash for the mouth of the cave."

The boy, my guide, intervened, saying, " I will go, Seth Sahib," giving me a start.

"No, you wait for toffees and *bakhsheesh*," I said to him, and to the Sanyasi, I added, " Pray, go on."

With a sigh, he fastened his black eyes on me — I was reminded of the glittering eyes of the Ancient Mariner— and proceeded, "There I found the entrance blocked by the enormous form of the elephant. I placed my feet on the dead elephant to walk over the elephant because in my despair I knew that there was no other way to escape from this hell. A still more strange thing happened.

"My feet sank down and down in the softened hide and body of the elephant. I was almost drowned in a pool of thick black fluid, as it were. My horror reached its climax. I prayed to God and to my *Guru*, more fervently than I had done before. With great ado, I extricated myself from the black dead mass of flesh and blood. I was dyed in the black viscous fluid all over when I walked away. I ran here and there like an animal at bay till I found the track that would take me back to my mountain abode.

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"I looked about like a frightened cat. Hearing a sound I was startled. I felt giddy, pained in every limb. Still a curious power of my will drove me on. I felt I was near to my *Guru* when, lo! he appeared from a bush. Tearful and relieved, I beckoned to him, finding words with great difficulty.

" 'What has happened to you ?' he shouted the question. 'I was searching for you for a long time.' There was deep pain in his voice.

"Bathed in tears and in a faint voice, I narrated to him my horrifying story while we walked back. I was leaning on his shoulder. He thought awhile and then said, 'The big serpent that you saw is terribly poisonous. It is the most poisonous snake in India. It bit the elephant and the big beast was poisoned so much that its flesh rotted in a few moments, and its blood was blackened by the poison. You have been bathed in that poisoned mass. Hurry up, you are in danger.'

"My Guru laid me on a cot. He fetched a dried root and made a drink out of it after grinding it and diluting it in water. I drank it and became senseless and forgot the ache that pervaded my body even as this blackness does now. For forty days I was rubbed with a special paste made by my *Guru* and treated with other Vedic medicines, which the Guru knew well. I was saved by my *Guru* but he could not save my skin from turning black as charcoal. These boys, " a smile crept across his lips, as he patted the cowboy, "call me Charcoal Sanyasi and even worse. That is what I am."

I heaved a sigh.

"Have a drink of a herb," the Sanyasi said." It will do you good."

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17
Benediction

She had starved for the last two days. Not so, her two little sons, whom she fed on maize bread and rice water that her neighbour, Fati, had given her secretly. She looked haggard. Her darkened, furrowed cheeks were sunken. The scores of wrinkles round her eyes and mouth became more prominent though she hardly knew so. The one cup of salt tea that she took at Fati's home had soothed her parched tongue a little.

"Rahti, I have found a potato in the dust!" called her elder, ten-year-old son, who looked as if he had come in possession of a treasure. While he selfishly ate the find raw and dirty, Rahti brooded.

The last three years were years of terrible misery to her. Allah had singled her out for every tribulation under the sun, she said to herself. Her husband died, leaving her the widow mother of two young children. Her brothers supported her and helped her in the cultivation of the little patch of land that belonged to her. The 'water epidemic' — cholera— claimed one of her brothers as one of its victims. The other brother had migrated to the plains and was not heard of for two years. Rahti had to fend for herself as best as she could. She sweated from early morn till nightfall in the field, along with her sons, and somehow made two ends meet. But the rains did not come this year. The maize crop quite failed. The paddy holdings, the few that she had tilled, turned unproductive for lack of water. Nobody would lend her anything in cash or kind because everyone knew that she had nothing to fall back upon.

For two days she had eaten nothing. The initial pangs of hunger were gone. A curious calm possessed her. She felt like sleeping — the

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last blissful sleep. To kill herself appeared a selfish deed in the face of her semi-starving children. They reminded her of Samad, their deceased father, whom they resembled so much. They wore his broad smile on their bonny faces. Their innocent cheer, unmindful of the suffering of their mother, somehow jolted her out of her apathy. She must act to procure them food. She must live — for their sake.

There was one alternative in regard to the earning of bread which she had not so far tried. The streets of the nearby town of Saipur were open to her. There she could go and stretch her work-worn hands for alms. Should she carry her younger son with her as the mendicants usually did? Tears came to her eyes at the idea. She remembered days, the better days, when she would walk by the side of Samad towards the town of Saipur where there was a fair outside the shrine of a Muslim *Rishi* (saint). If Samad did not give charity to begging women with children, she would usually induce him to do so. Or, she would unfasten a knot of her head apron and give a copper to a mendicant. The beggar would bless her man and her child....

"Ama," she called her son. "We will go out for a walk."

"I shall come, mother?" said her elder son.

"No, you stay, some one may call".

Taking Ama's hand, Rahti walked towards the alley running between dismantled mud walls. Fati saw her from her dingy kitchen and asked her to stop for a while. Wiping her besmeared face with the cuff of her *pheran* sleeve, she asked Rahti, "Where are you going?"

"To beg in the town street," she answered, simply.

"To beg!" Fati exclaimed. "No, you won't. I was just coming to you with news. First I wanted to finish my kitchen work. Last Friday, we talked about the new seed farm of the Pandit that lies yonder. His wife had come to live with him two days back. The Panditani is so good. Come, we will go to her."

"What is the use ?"

" Come, come, you will see."

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Fati was right. The seed farm that Pandit Janki Nath Kaul had opened in the village was a boon to the peasants. To the unemployed who were, like Rahti, on the point of deserting their village, it was a godsend. They found work. They were very adequately paid. One hour's mid-day rest was allowed to them. The Pandit stood them salt tea and *Kulcha* cakes in the afternoon. His wife, Prabha Kaul, took pity on the village women. She expressed her sympathy with the poor and downtrodden in so many ways.

She was strolling on the green lawn in front of her small bungalow when Fati and Rahti *salaamed* her. She recognised Fati and addressed her, " Do you want more tomatoes ? You can take a seer or two. Only return us the seed. You know, we need the seed."

"Yes, yes," stammered Fati. "I shall have tomatoes. May Allah shower blessings on you. With me is Rahti, she has not eaten for the last two days."

"Two days, O Ram !" said Prabha Kaul. "Ask her to sit down."

She hurried into her house. After a few moments, she came out with a large water-melon. She cut it open and exposed its rich vermilion inside. "Eat as much as you like," she said to Rahti and passed her a knife.

Rahti hesitated. She scarcely believed her eyes. Were Pandits and Panditanis really so good? She made Ama eat first. Herself she gulped down several handfuls of melon pieces along with the seed. She found that she was perspiring due to excitement. Persuaded by Fati and the Panditani she ate more. Fati joined her and they finished the juicy lemon.

"May Allah shower his blessings on you, my sister!" she prayed, with outstretched hands, fixing her eyes on Prabha Kaul. In peasant simplicity, she continued, " I did not know that Pandits are so good. We had a Pandit *Patwari* in our village. He was hard on my late husband."

"Is she the lost one?" Prabha Kaul asked Fati.

"Yes, sister, she has suffered much after the death of her husband. Crops have failed. She is helpless."

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"Don't tell me more," the Panditani appealed her. "I know much about the destitution of our Muslim brothers and sisters in these parts. We are doing what we can, in this farm, to alleviate their sufferings. Rahti, you and your sons will work on our farm."

"My sister," said Rahti, tears shining in her sunken eyes, "I bless you. Allah will reward you!"

They looked into each other's eyes. There was the perfect understanding of sympathy in their glances.

"You take rice and cook your meal first," suggested the Panditani. "You can consume as many tomatoes as you like."

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18
Sacrifice

A dark pall of silence hung over Muzaffarabad though night had just fallen. The wretched terrified inhabitants crept to their homes like so many rats. The ruling tribesmen, the bullying officials of the self-styled Azad Kashmir government and their stooges, repaired their way to brothels and drinking resorts where the 'victors' chatted.

"This is Radio Pakistan giving you the latest bulletin of Azad Kashmir government" broadcast the radio, run on battery, round which the Pathan Sardar, the Minister for Law and Order, and their men sat in a circle. They pulled at big pieces of mutton, which was being roasted in the fireplace. The room was lit by a chandelier. "Shabash hamara radio", said the Sardar as he heard Radio Pakistan, announcing the capturing of certain strategic positions by the forces of 'Azad Kashmir' government, which were in fact still in the hands of Indian troops. The men smiled in bewilderment. The Minister for Law and Order, a Muslim lawyer hailing from Sopore — remarked, "Brothers, this is the way to hoodwink the world. Sardar Mohammad Khan knows what news to give out to the world. We wired the statement today".

Sardar Mohammad Khan twirled his moustache. He remembered his career in Berlin during the Nazi regime where he picked up the Goebellsian method of propaganda which he now used to perfection.

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But he was disconcerted to find that other news of Muzaffarabad and the front of Uri was being broadcast by All India Radio. Who sent them the correct news? He gulped down a goblet of wine to forget this and other worries that taxed him. Getting warmer, he said to his wine-bearer, "Who is it tonight?"

"The Sikh blonde, Sardar."

"That is right, man. Sikh women have better bodies than other *Kaffir* wenches. Pour more wine."

In a cell of a room in the same locality sat two men before a window. They would fain have lighted lamps but the oil was a commodity too precious to be consumed for lighting. The prevailing quiet was disturbed at intervals by groups of tribesmen who were going in or coming out of their dens.

"Gula, you are so good to us." confessed Radhakrishen. "But for you I would have starved. And, my daughter might have been abducted just as so many women were."

Tears filled his eyes as he recollected the terrible date, 23rd October, 1947— when the raiders had looted and raped indiscriminately. He had met Ghulam Mohammad, his former classmate, who had fetched him a *salwar* so that he looked Muslim on wearing it. Finding that there was no other way, Mohammad had also fetched a little potassium cyanide for Radhakrishen's only daughter. "Father, what is this bitter medicine?" the dying girl had innocently asked. That was better than what might have been her life with the savage invaders. His wife was in the city of Srinagar whither she had gone before the Dussehra to attend the marriage of a relative. His daughter was particular about her studies in the local middle school for girls. Who knew that her remaining behind in Muzaffarabad would culmi-

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nate in an unnatural death? Radhakrishen heaved a sigh as he wiped his eyes with his bare hand. He had no kerchief. Every little piece of cloth had been looted by the raiders.

"My heart is torn whenever I think of your daughter," consoled Ghulam Mohammad.

"Gula, you saved her. She went to heaven."

"What will you do now, Radhakrishen?" asked his friend, sympathetically.

"I must go back to the city. My mother and wife must be in a very bad condition worrying for me."

"Well, you can, but you have to take a great risk."

"I am prepared."

Peasants had been trekking from Bandipore to Muzaffarabad via Teetwal, over a difficult mountain track in order to get supply of salt for their village. The self-styled 'Azad Kashmir' government had the needed commodity sold to them and also endeavoured to use them as fifth columnists. They sent some agents with the party of peasants to Bandipore. These efforts did not, however, produce much result. None of them knew that their activities were frustrated by Ghulam Mohammad who met the peasants in secret and reinforced the message of inter-communal amity of Kashmir upon them and made them the sponsors and supporters of the nation's cause, the nation that he must see freed from the clutches of the merciless invaders who despoiled the fair bosom of the Vale.

"You are already disguised as a Muslim, Radhakrishen. You have to look a peasant and then, carrying a load of salt, you will return to

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Mother Kashmir."

"Friend, I am so fortunate in having you with me in this hour of trial."

"Don't speak, some one is passing in the lane."

Blustering, gay, drunk Pathans broke the silence of the night. "I stumbled upon the skull of a Kaffir", said one. Others guffawed. " I kissed the fair face of another," rejoined, another adding a coarse oath. There was an uproar. The two friends heard and sighed, almost at once. They retired to their shared bed which ill stood the cold, though they slept with all their clothes on.

A cheerful sun showed its face over the unhappy town. The rats walked stealthily out of their holes. The 'liberators', as the invaders called themselves, went about fussily, with loaded guns, requisitioning everything they wanted, from everybody, on pain of death.

There was a crowd before the shop of the newly-opened salt depot. The Punjabi who owned the shop had been 'liquidated' on the first day of the raid. A swaggering Pathan ran the depot. He was assisted by a Kashmiri Pandit clerk who used to be the headmaster of the high school. Over a torn shirt, he wore an improvised cape made out of gunny stuff. He had since forgotten that he looked ridiculous.

Recognising Radhakrishen among the peasants, he took him aside and said," Where is your daughter?"

"In another world."

"Your family?' Radhakrishen asked.

"My wife was carried away. My son was shot dead by a tribesman

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when he said to the fellow, 'No, I will not come with you. I shall live and die in Kashmir.' And, now I am the clerk here, the clerk, O *Bhagwan*., what is your will? What a life! Will you tell my people that I am the survivor yet. Don't tell them what I wear and what I eat."

"You *Kaffir*, write down the quantity of salt sold," thundered the Pathan at the clerk.

"Yes, Khan Sahib" He went to his busy register. Ghulam Mohammad gave Radhakrishen a letter to a leader of the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference at Srinagar, acquainting him with Muzaffarabad conditions and giving advice as to the manner of the raid by Indian troops on the positions occupied by tribesmen and Pakistan soldiers. It was the sixth letter of this kind that Ghulam Mohammad had sent. He also gave his friend some money. The party of peasants left the shop. Ghulum Mohammad accompanied them for some distance. He gave final directions to the ones who were to do certain jobs of strategic importance. The parting of the friends was pathetic. "May Allah be with you!" each one said to the other.

Returning to his dwelling, Ghulam Mohammad thought over his programme. He knew that his mission was dangerous, but he was more than a match for the invaders. What he did not know was that a Pathan spy who had suspected him was following him. Directly the spy returned to the headquarters, he lodged a report with the Sardar.

Ghulam Mohammad was talking to his servant in the kitchen when he heard a knock on the door. Three Pathan soldiers and the spy entered the kitchen unceremoniously. They kicked the utensils about. "He is Ghulam Mohammad, the National fellow," barked the spy.

A soldier caught him by the wrist and said, "Come with us, you Kashmiri *sala*."

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"I do not understand", pleaded Ghulam Mohammad, in surprise. His servant who was a local man was also arrested. The soldiers helped themselves with utensils and supplies that they found in the kitchen and the small cell of a room that adjoined it.

"Search the prisoner", ordered the Sardar, when Ghulam Mohammad was produced before him.

The search yielded letters from Srinagar and Bandipore National Conference leaders. It was proof positive of treachery to 'Azad Kashmir' Government. The secretary read out the letters. The Sardar flew in rage and thundered, "Now I know how All India Radio and Sheikh Abdullah, our enemy No.1, got the news of Muzaffarabad and Uri fronts. Torture the bastard Kaffir— he is no Muslim— as well as his man. We will know more when their flesh burns."

Savage torture yielded little information from Ghulam Mohammad but his servant broke under the pain of brands which burnt his skin on the cheeks and fingers, preceded by bayonet thrusts on his body. He revealed how Ghulam Mohammad helped Radhakrishen and other Hindus and how he met the party of Kashmiri peasants in his room.

"This fellow is a *sala Kaffir,*" raged the Sardar. "He helped these wretched *Kaffirs* and he is in touch with our enemies whom we are determined to wipe from the face of the Valley".

"I did my duty, Khan" at last spoke Ghulam Mohammad dauntily, in spite of the excruciating pain he experienced all over his tortured body. "Your nemesis will come. Your days are numbered. Indian troops and Kashmiris, headed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sher-e-Kashmir Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, worthy sons of the beautiful

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soil of Kashmir, will expel you and humiliate you in the eyes of the world. You self-appointed heads of 'Azad Kashmir' government, your doom—"

"You dare speak so!" interrupted the Sardar, his hand going to his dagger. "You remind me of Maqbool Sherwani whom I had shot by a firing squad. You deserve the same fate. Soldiers, stand this traitor against that wall and finish him."

A volley of shots riddled the body of the martyr of Muzaffarabad.

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Folk-tales

Introduction

Kashmir has an inexhaustible fund of folk-tales — the popular component of the "literature of the people", as folklore has been aptly characterised. Folk-tales of Kashmir, like "Himal and Nagraya" and "Zohra Khotan and Haya Bund" are distinctly Kashmiri in origin. Naga or snake also means a spring in Kashmir: both feature in the "Magic Ring" story. "Shabrang, the Prince-Thief" has delightful replicas in Dravidian and Chinese tales. In the Zohra Khotan tale, Zohra, a famed beauty, is relentlessly pursued by a rich merchant; she shapes a clay head and invokes God to transform it into a replica of her own head. The miracle dummy, complete with dripping blood, is presented to the merchant !

The 'Wily Dervish' is outwitted — to the bitter end. Find it out for yourself. Similarly, in "The Tailor and the Jinns", the smart tailor, aided by a weaver, outwit the Jinns, come away from the forest loaded with gold and jewels and live happily ever after as do most characters in fairy tales.

The Dogri and Ladakhi folk-tales — current in the regions of Jammu and Ladakh in the Jammu & Kashmir State — have a distinct flavour, reflecting the customs, rites and superstitions of these areas. A sampling of these tales is presented to complete the composite cultural spectrum of the Valley.

Altogether, the collection of these folk-tales should prove a source of abiding pleasure to all those, in India and abroad, who are interested in the folk literature of the northernmost state of our country as part of our rich, national cultural heritage.

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19

Himal and Nagraya

Soda Ram was henpecked. No, for him there was no peace or respite from his wife's shrewish temper. One day it reached his ears that the Raja of Kashmir was to distribute alms among the poor. "I too shall visit the capital to receive the Raja's bounty," he said to himself. "That will take me away from my wife's loathsome presence, if it be only for a short while."

So Soda Ram set out on the distant journey. But on the way, overpowered by the summer heat, he went to sleep under a tree in the forest. When he awoke he found to his consternation that a serpent had crept into his sack. A sudden bright idea, however, drove the terror away. He snapped the sack shut, fastened it securely and hurried home, for here was salvation at last from his wife's evil tongue.

"Look, I have a lovely gift for you," he shouted to the woman, flourishing his sack even before he had crossed the threshold. "Get into the privacy of your own room and open it. You will have a surprise!"

The avaricious woman snapped at the prize and rushed indoors, while the husband, chuckling to himself, waited for the end. But, instead of the agonised shriek he hoped to hear, there issued from inside a joyous cry. Soda Ram tip-toed to the room, and what should meet his eyes but the loveliest boy you could think of. There the little one stood like a prince and no trace of the serpent was found. The childless couple were transported with joy. Here was a son to be a solace to their declining years. They called him Nagraya and brought him up as their own child.

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Nagraya grew up comely and intelligent beyond his years. There was no wish of his that his fond parents would not fulfil.

One morning he begged his father to be taken to the fairest pool in the neighbourhood for a bath. "The loveliest pool here about belongs to our young princess," said Soda Ram, "and the like of us may not use it. And how, indeed, could you get to it? There are seven rings of walls around it and guards at every gate."

"But take me thither," implored Nagraya. And, when the fond parents had led him to the outermost wall, the lad changed into a serpent and crept in through a drain pipe. No sooner had he reached the pool than he changed back to his human shape and disported himself in the sparkling waters.

It chanced that the splash-splash fell on the ears of the Princess who ran to discover who the impious intruder could be. There before her eyes was as handsome a prince as she had ever beheld. She was smitten with love but how could she let the trespass go unpunished. She summoned the guards to seize the offender but Nagraya had in the twinkling of an eye changed into a serpent and stealthily crept out of sight. Himal — that was the Princess' name — secretly resolved to wed the comely intruder and it was not long before her servant had traced him to Soda Ram's cottage.

It was unthinkable, the Raja said, to let his only daughter wed a poor Brahmin's son. But how could he hold out against her unceasing importunities? So at last he agreed to the match.

As the day appointed for the wedding dawned, Soda Ram was filled with a gnawing sorrow. How could he provide the fineries becoming the Princess' bridegroom? But Nagraya comforted him, sayi, "Go to the pool by the spot where you first found me, cast this pebble into the water and hurry back without as much as one glance over your shoulder."

Wondering greatly, Soda Ram, perfomed this strange rite and at his threshold turned round to behold a resplendent retinue of soldiers with music and banners, and pile upon pile of magnificent gifts for the bride. His own rags, the poor Brahmin now discovered, were gone. He was attired in regal splendour even as Nagraya was.

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So the procession set out for the palace and the king and queen, who despised the groom for his poverty, now gazed with bewildered pride on this gorgeous array. The wedding ceremony of Himal and Nagraya was performed with great pomp and show.

As so often happens in life, the happiness of Himal and Nagraya did not last long. Nagraya, as we have said, was actually a snake who could transform himself into a human. He was a king of snakes and his abode was the pool by the mulberry tree, where Soda ram had found him. It was a hallowed pool, and deep under it was his palace where lived his snake-wives.

The snake queens missed Nagraya very much. They despatched spies all around to discover his whereabouts. The spies came back with the report that Nagraya was living in splendour with Princess Himal in her palace. One of the wives — they too had the capacity to take the human form at will — decided to take the initiative to bring Nagraya back to them.

Dressed as a gypsy, she approached Himal, and asked her point-blank, "Please tell me whether Nagraya, my husband, lives here."

Angered by the query, Himal said, "How can Nagraya be husband of a low-caste woman like you? He is a Brahmin, of the high caste, and he is my husband."

Not to be put off, the snake-wife persisted, "You don't know Nagraya, the clever one. He is a cheat. He is not a Brahmin at all. I tell you now to test him. Ask him to stand in the water of the pool by the stunted mulberry tree, you know the big pool, the sacred one. Then you ask him to swear that he is a Brahmin."

Himal did precisely that, against the protestations of Nagraya who had understood the game that his snake-wives were playing to get him back. He kept on telling Himal, "Don't persist in this game. You will repent later." But her mind was made up. She made him stand in the water of the pool and asked, "Now take an oath that you are a Brahmin."

Nagraya's feet sank in the sand and slush of the pool. Slipping down and down, he went on saying, "Don't Himal, don't", to which she replied obstinately, "Tell me your caste". Unknown to her, the

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snake-wives were pulling Nagraya from below, and he disappeared, leaving not a trace. Realising her loss, Himal cried and sobbed, and returned forlorn to her palace.

Living practically like a widow, Himal spent most of her time in prayers, looking after the poor and needy. One day when she was giving alms, a hermit accosted her and said, "I passed the sacred pool by the mulberry tree and a strange sight met my eyes. A youngman dressed as a prince came out of the water. He carried a plate full of viands. He kept it under the tree, saying, 'Dear Himal, this is for you'."

Realising that the Prince was none other than her own Nagraya, Himal thanked the hermit and repaired to the pool at the hour of midnight. Sure enough, Nagraya, as handsome as ever, emerged from the pool with the plate in his hands. He was about to deposit it when Himal went near him, prostrated herself in front of him, imploring, "Forgive me, my Nagraya." Controlling her sobs, she added, "I can't live without you. Take me with you."

Nagraya told Himal his fear, that his snake-wives would kill her but she would hear none of it. So he thought out a stratagem. He changed her into a shining diamond and, with that in his pocket, he went down to his palace in the bowels of the pool. The snake-wives were too smart for him. They smelled human flesh and asked him to produce the person.

Left with no other alternative, Nagraya changed the diamond back to the form of Himal. It took him a long time to persuade the snake-queens to let her stay. None of them liked her hold on him. To make her thoroughly miserable, they made her do the most exhausting chores and fed her the least. Himal was not the one to complain so long as she was near her long-lost Nagraya.

Things came to a head too soon. One day Himal had boiled a pot of milk when the snake-children were crying for their feed. Not knowing that hot milk should not be served to the off-spring of snakes, Himal let them have it. The result was that they died one and all, the hot milk scalding their throat. Beside themselves with rage, on seeing the spectacle, the snake-wives stung Himal again and again, and she died on the spot.

Nagraya was shocked to see Himal lying dead. He had her fair

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body embalmed, and carried it to the mulberry tree. He made an alcove for her body and left it there in the shade. Every day he would come up to the spot to remember Himal and cry a little.

A hermit chanced to come that way one afternoon. Seeing the beautiful embalmed body, he took pity on it. Crushing some herbs, he extracted a fluid which he put in the mouth of Himal. And, lo and behold, Himal got up as if she had never been dead! The hermit conducted her to his nearby Ashram.

Coming up for his tryst with the mummy, Nagraya found that the body was gone. He sent his spies in all directions to find out where it could be. They came back with the happy news that she was alive, in an Ashram, and very well looked after.

Changing into the form of a snake, Nagraya entered the Ashram at the dead of night. He found Himal asleep and did not want to disturb her sleep. So he lay by her, still in his snake form. It so happened that the son of the hermit entered the room. Seeing a snake next to Himal, he killed it with a big stick.

Awakened by the fight between man and snake, Himal saw the dead snake, and recognised it from the crown on the hood. She addressed the boy, "You don't know what you have done. You have killed my husband. He had come here in the form of a snake."

The dead snake was cremated as befited a prince. Himal threw herself into the funeral pyre. Hardly had the hermit expected that this would be the fate of Himal, when he brought her back to life. He was saddened at this state of affairs.

As the hermit sat, pensive and sad, a voice came from the unknown: "Don't be sad any more, O sage. Take some of the ashes of Himal and Nagraya and throw these in the sacred pool by the mulberry tree. They will come back to life."

The hermit did as he was told. The lovers, Himal and Nagraya, lived once again, coming out of the pool in their human form. They went back to Himal's palace. When Himal's father died, Nagraya became king, and they lived happily for a long time.

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20
Zohra Khotan and Haya Bund

Long ago, a rich merchant lived in the charming Valley of Kashmir. He had a handsome son whom his parents called Haya Bund.

Two poor orphaned brothers, clad in rags, passed by the merchant's shop one morning. Learning that they were destitute orphans, the merchant took them to his home as companions for Haya Bund. They helped him in his shop, but though he taught them along with Haya Bund, they did not take to reading and writing, for they were evil and restless by nature.

Haya Bund duly grew up and, attaining his majority, was betrothed to the daughter of a merchant in the town. The two orphans plotted to break the betrothal by spreading false rumours about him but their efforts failed, much to their disappointment.

The day of marriage came. As the gay marriage procession set out, the two brothers drugged Haya Bund on the way.

They told his father-in-law that he was a fool and an idiot. These words had their desired effect, for Haya Bund really looked stupid because of the effect of the drug. But Zohra Khotan accepted Haya Bund as her lord, howsoever bad he looked, because the betrothal had sacredly tied her to him. To her joy, however, Haya Bund recovered from the dulling effect of the drug.

When they all began their homeward journey, Zohra Khotan was carried in a grand palanquin.

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They broke journey for the night near a river, when Zohra Khotan suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to bring a present for her mother-in-law.

This distressed her, but she fell asleep because the day's journey had tired her. She dreamt that a man came to her and said: "Wake up, virtuous Zohra Khotan, do not be sad. Go ye to the bank of the river, where a corpse will confront thee in the water. Call it and it will come towards you. Take off the diamond bracelet from its hand as your present."

Dressing hastily, Zohra Khotan went to the river and procured the bracelet as instructed.

The two jealous beggar brothers, always bent on mischief, had followed her. They went and told the merchant and others afterwards: "Zohra Khotan is a cannibal witch. She left her tent in the night and killed a woman, sucked her blood and wrested a bracelet from her hands."

Haya Bund was sad, the more so because he did not believe that his wife was a witch. He grew weak and to improve his health the merchant suggested a trading tour.

The two brothers accompanied him. On the way, Haya Bund suddenly remembered that he had forgotten his account books which were locked up in Zohra Khotan's room. He went back for them, but when he entered the room, his wife's beauty and intellect at once entranced him.

He stayed with her secretly for some time and then joined the two brothers, but they understood where he had been.

Disguising themselves as holy *faqirs*, they went to the merchant's house, where they made a charge against the woman living in the house. The credulous merchant once again, taken in by them, found out that Zohra Khotan corresponded to the description given by the *faqirs*. He had her taken before the public prosecutor who found her guilty and condemned her to death.

Brought to the place of execution on the fixed day, Zohra Khotan was placed on the scaffold where she was to be beheaded; but when the executioner lifted his sword, he found his arm held in the air by an

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unseen power. The second executioner tried, and his hand also stopped likewise; the third fared no better. Wonderstruck, they addressed Zohra Khotan thus: "What sort of a woman art thou?"

She said simply: "I am innocent."

Zohra Khotan, by dint of the power of her innocence and chastity, enjoined on a wayside tree to tell her lord, when he passed that way, that she was still alive. Going to another city, she made her abode with a poor old widow and began to eke out a living. She gave birth to a lovely son, and left the baby with the widow whenever she went out for work.

The king of that city had six daughters. When the queen was about to give birth to another child, he warned her that if it were a daughter again, he would kill her. But the queen gave birth to a daughter and fearing the king's wrath, she at once sent her maid to fetch a male child as a substitute.

The maid came to the widow's house and the greedy woman readily parted with Zohra's baby for a large sum of money.

Pining for her husband, Zohra Khotan passed her days with the widow. A merchant heard of her virtue and comeliness. He pursued her with his attentions but she showed no response. One day he sent two of his strongmen to bring Zohra Khotan forcibly to his house.

"Tell your lord that I'm dead," she told them. She shaped some earth into a clay head, and prayed to God. Her prayer heeded, the clay model changed into Zohra's head, dripping with blood.

"Take this," she told the men, "and give it to the merchant". They departed with the head.

Thus, left to herself with the widow, Zohra Khotan passed her days in penury. Meanwhile, her son grew up to be a handsome lad. One day the prince passed her house and her sad beauty bewitched him. He made up his mind to marry her, and the king, who loved the prince very much, on hearing of the beauty of Zohra Khotan, agreed to the marriage. But Zohra Khotan pleaded that the marriage be delayed by six months for she still hoped that her husband would return.

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Haya Bund roamed in many cities as a forlorn trader. The tree, near which Zohra Khotan was supposed to have been executed, communicated her message to him. He took heart and began searching for her everywhere till he reached the city where she lived.

Haya Bund sought the cause of the stir in and around the palace, and was told about the marriage. He sent his signet ring to Zohra Khotan in the apartment where she was being dressed up as the bride. Seeing the ring she cast off her bride's robes and ran into the arms of her lord.

The prince was furious at this, but the old widow, who could contain her secret no longer, revealed his true identity to him as Zohra Khotan's son. Zohra Khotan was reunited to Haya Bund and her son.

They left the city for their home town where they lived happily ever after.

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21
Shabrang—Prince-Thief

Once, long ago, the King of Kashmir went a-hunting in the jungle. As the sun hung low in the western sky, he gave chase to a magnificent stag and was carried farther and farther away from his capital.

In the hour of sunset, he found himself in a lovely garden. Strolling about among the exquisitely laid-out flower beds was a beauteous maiden, alone and unattended. "A princess, surely", thought the King, "but how proud and arrogant she looks." She, on her part, did not as much as throw a glance in his direction. Stung to the quick, the King muttered just above a whisper, "I would that some prince took you for his bride and then abandoned you in this very garden."

The Princess (for she was, in truth, one) tossed her head in disdain. "I would that someone marry you and bear you a son who will wed your own daughter:" she retorted with a pout, as she walked away.

That was, of course, more than the King could bear. But he had been deeply smitten by the maiden's charms. "Come what may, I must marry her," he thought as he rode back to his palace. Next morning, he summoned his Vizier and the royal go-between. He bid them go post-haste to the Princess's father, who ruled the neighbouring kingdom, and negotiate for her hand in marriage. That ruler, as one might imagine, was flattered by the suit of no less a personage than the King of Kashmir. And it wasn't long before the messengers came back to announce the success of their mission.

A week later, the King of Kashmir rode out at the head of a glittering cavalcade to fetch his bride. People stared in wide-eyed wonder as he passed by. When he rode back with the proud Princess,

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So Prince Shabrang journeyed far to his father's kingdom. To find employment in the royal household was easy enough — the lad had engaging looks and a pleasing wit. It was but a short step to catch the King's eye. The rest was simple. Day by day he rose higher in his master's favour. The King would have none other for his personal attendant.

Prince Shabrang, however, led a double life. The urge to practise the skill he had been taught was strong upon him. In the darkness of the night, while the city slept, he stole out on noiseless feet. How easy it seemed to him to steal from the mansions of the rich! There was no lock that he could not pick, and no treasure, howsoever jealously guarded, that he could not snatch away. As for the guards who paced the city's streets, he just snapped his fingers at them!

So, in time, the tale of Shabrang's depredations got known. Of course, none guessed who the culprit was. They only knew he was cleverer than any they had known in the past, and most elusive. To the King's court came people bemoaning their losses, and crying out aloud for protection. "We shall be robbed of everything we possess, great Sire!" they wailed, "unless the guards redouble their vigil and catch the villain."

What could the perplexed King do? He sent for the chief of the city police, and ordered him, on pain of dismissal, to apprehend the rogue.

It was midnight and pitch dark as the Police Chief wandered about the city's maze of lanes and alleys. He whistled softly to himself and twirled his moustache.

No thief would get past him! No hiding-place but he peered into it, no suspicious loiterer but he pounced upon him.

"Ha, who is this?" He exclaimed under his breath as a shadow flitted past, and he gave chase. When he dragged the struggling figure into the light of a street-lamp, he saw it was only a young maiden. "What, pray, are you doing at this ghostly hour?" he demanded in his most ferocious tone, to hide his chagrin. Shivering, the girl brought out, "The thief you have been looking for is somewhere about. I heard his stealthy footsteps. He may be here in a moment....O-o-oh! I am afraid."

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"Calm yourself, silly !" the chief admonished her. "Let me think....I shall lay a trap for the scoundrel."

There was a soft interruption from the girl. "If you will pardon me...I suggest you disguise yourself...Why, we might exchange our garments." She clapped her hands with delight. "Yes....and stand beside the well yonder and pretend to be drawing water. Now, don't you agree that's an excellent plan?"

The Police Chief fell in with the scheme readily. The girl is smart, he thought. Wrapped in her *pheran*, he walked to the well. But poor, innocent man, what did he know of its crude mechanism? When he tugged violently at the rope, he was thrown off his balance. Next moment he was dangling at the end of the rope, just above the water's edge, inside the shaft of the well. Who was there now to pay heed to his cries for help? From somewhere above his head he heard the maiden's mocking laughter. "They will pull you out at dawn, my friend. Now I may go about in safety!" That, as you must have guessed already, was our hero, Shabrang.

Were the honest citizens thrown into panic and confusion? The Police Chief dangling at the end of a rope, to be the laughing stock of every ragamuffin in town. The thief slipping through the fingers of the guards! "Preposterous!" they shouted with one accord. So, in the palace yard, the people raised another big clamour!

The King was at his wits' end. Nothing could now satisfy him save the Vizier's undertaking the mission himself.

The Vizier, of course, did not relish the task of patrolling the city's twisting alleyways by night. But carry out the King's injunction he must. His horse ambled along leisurely. Its hooves beat out a plaintive tune on the ancient cobblestones. Suddenly the Vizier espied, by the flickering light of a lantern, an old, wrinkled woman grinding maize by the roadside. "What keeps you up so late in the night granny?" he enquired. And on an idle impulse, added, "Have you by, any chance seen our champion rogue hereabouts?"

"I wouldn't say No, I wouldn't say Yes," the old dame answered in a shrill voice. "There are funny sounds I have been hearing for some time. Well, he may be close by, for all I know.'

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It was the same ruse all over again. The "old woman" had quickly persuaded the thoughtless Vizier to wear her rags and to sit at the grinding stone. Shabrang (again it was the Prince-Thief in disguise) was soon riding away into the night on the Vizier's horse!

There was a hullabaloo in the city next morning. Hundreds of people tumbled out into the streets crying that their hoarded treasures had been stolen. The Vizier had been discovered in an old woman's rags grinding maize by the roadside. What a disgrace!

The King was beside himself with mortification. He stormed a good deal, while his courtiers listened with heads bowed in shame. "You are a set of idle, scatter-brained good-for-nothings! This thief has every one of us tied in knots. Listen, if the thief proclaims himself, we will give him our daughter in marriage and straightaway bestow half of our kingdom upon him. He is a better man than all of you put together, I am sure."

In the silence that followed, Shabrang stepped forth, looking like a young god. "Is that a pledge, Sire?" he enquired. The King stared at the impudent youngster. "Yes, indeed," he said and stared the harder. What was so familiar about the lad's features? His thoughts chased round and round this teasing question.

"I am the thief you are looking for, Sire," Shabrang announced amidst pin-drop silence." If you must have proof, I'll restore to its rightful owner every single thing that has been stolen in the city. Choose the hour, my lord, and it shall be done!"

The King's eyes softened. He had taken a great fancy to this handsome boy. And this confession of a surpassing skill inclined his heart towards the youngster even more strongly.

But Shabrang would not marry the princess until his mother had been sent for. "I can do naught without my mothers counsel, Sire," he protested.

When Shabrang's mother appeared before the King of Kashmir she handed him the ring he had given her as a love token. "Shabrang is your son, my lord," said she. "How can he ever marry his own sister?"

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The King nodded his head, but he hardly understood. And Prince Shabrang's mother, with gentle raillery, recalled the long-forgotten episode — the tale of an encounter in a garden, an idle oath and the angry retort that it had called forth.

There were tears in the King's eyes as he embraced his queen — tears at the same time of happiness and penitence. As for Prince Shabrang, he was proclaimed heir to the throne of Kashmir amidst a round of festivities seldom before equalled in splendour.

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22

The Story-teller and his Five Maxims

Once, very long ago, four friends set out on a far journey. To beguile the tedium of the hours they took turns at recounting stories. When each of them had finished his tale, they fell in with a stranger. "Tell us a story, comrade," they implored him with one voice.

"You shall have five stories, my friends," the stranger replied, "if you will pay me five hundred pieces of silver."

"You set too high a price on your powers of entertainment," they cried out in protest. "But amongst the four of us, we will each pay a hundred pieces of silver. That's good value, to be sure?"

The stranger nodded agreement, collected four hundred shining coins and cleared his throat. "My stories aren't really stories, you must understand," he began. "They are maxims for you guidance; but, let me assure you, they are worth their weight in gold. Pray, listen:

"Money, my good friend, is meant for travel. That's the first.

"A friend will stand by you even while you are penniless.

"Lean upon no relation in the hour of distress.

"A wife is true and loyal so long as she is by her husband's side.

"And for my last maxim, he alone shall win the hand of Emperor Vikramaditya's daughter who can vanquish sleep.

"That's all, brothers, and may the gods protect you on your wayfaring."

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No sooner had the story-teller finished than the four travellers set up a clamour. Shaking angry fists in his face, they shouted that they had been brazenly cheated. What gross impudence! Stories, forsooth! At last, after they had cried themselves hoarse, they dragged the stranger into the King's presence and laid a complaint against him.

The King listened patiently as the four men, spluttering with rage, told of the impostor's trick. "Here is something intriguing," he said to himself. Then he turned to the victim of so much wrath and addressed him: "Well, my good man, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Sire," the story-teller made answer with great composure, "I gave them five maxims to cherish and to live by. Four hundred pieces of silver was all they gave me in return for counsel beyond all price. A paltry sum, I reckon. I shall repeat them for your royal ears, Sire, if you will deign to give me five hundred silver pieces."

After a moment's thought, the King summoned his treasurer and ordered the money to be counted out. Thereupon, the story-teller intoned the five maxims in the same unruffled tones, and fell silent.

The King's first impulse was to laugh at this foolishness. Then he reflected on the strange words. Wouldn't it be a good idea to put them to the test? Had he not paid a whole lot of money for the advice?

One fine morning, therefore, the King sent his queen off to her parents, and announced that he was setting forth on a secret mission. At dead of night he stole out of his palace attired like a mendicant. But, in deference to the story-teller's precept, he carried hidden on his person seven precious rubies.

After many weary days' journeying, the King appeared before his sister's door, begging for food and shelter. This sister was queen of a neighbouring kingdom. When she saw her brother clothed in tatters and besmeared with the dust and grime of travel, she was struck dumb with amazement. But there was not a shadow of pity in her eyes. He sought to soften her heart with a woeful tale of defeat in battle and utter ruin.

She only recoiled from him in shame. "Do not disgrace me in the eyes of my husband," she screamed. "Away with you and your filthy rags!"

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"You are hard-hearted, my beloved sister," said the beggar in a voice that seemed to tremble with self-pity.

"I give you my word I will not darken your door with my presence. But will you not relent just a little and send me food that I may appease my hunger? I am tired and famished as I have never been before in my life," As he turned to leave, he said over his shoulder, "And as a token of your charity, please set your own seal on the dish."

When the food was brought to the royal mendicant, he repaired to a lonely spot and buried the dish deep under the earth. Then he resumed his wanderings.

Two days later the King, still disguised as a beggar, sought the house of a friend of earlier days, in yet another kingdom. What an overwhelming welcome awaited him here! The good man rushed out and clasped the King in a fond embrace, notwithstanding the signs of poverty and squalor that stood out on his person. He led him indoors with every mark of hospitality, gave him clean garments to wear, rich and delicious food to eat and a soft bed to lie in. If the King was in trouble, why, here was healing for his wounds. All that this honest soul possessed was at his friend's disposal to the uttermost.

Early next morning, the King fought back his tears and swallowed the lump in his throat as he said good-bye to his true friend. No, for all the worthy man's entreaties, he would not tarry. He had a long journey to go, he said, and many big tasks to accomplish.

As he dared forth, the King's thought turned on the story-teller's maxims. How truly he had spoken! In the hour of one's deepest grief one's own kith and kin cast one off, while in the selfsame hour one found one's anchor in a friend.

The King's wanderings now took him to the country where his queen dwelt under her father's roof. Here he found employment with the Master of Horse to the royal household, a person of massive build, with a swaggering, handsome face, and a black, sinful heart.

Going about his errands, one evening, our hero espied a strange woman creeping stealthily into his master's inner chamber. A nameless suspicion crept into his mind. He tiptoed to the door and peeped

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through the key-hole. O horror of horrors! It was his own queen with the Master of Horse! And as if to rub salt into his raw wound, he then heard lovers' soft murmurings issuing from within. How, indeed, could he bear this agony of soul!

A shout broke in upon his torment. The door had been flung open. It was the Master of Horse pointing to a broken chair. "Hey, you, can you mend this for me, quick?"

What could our hero do but obey? As he set about the task, the guilty woman took one quick look at his face. Next moment, shaking with terror, she was whispering into her paramour's ear, "That's my husband, that creature! May the gods help me! Send for your executioner this instant, let his head be cut off. Else I am lost!"

So the poor, innocent servant was dragged out into the forest to be despatched to his doom. But, happily, the executioner was as covetous as he was *cruel*. When his victim fetched seven large, blood-red rubies out of his waistband, his eyes grew large with greed. "You shall have three of them for yourself if you will let me go," the King said. "The rest you shall have for safe-keeping till I call for them." The wretch was not loath to set his prisoner free in return for riches beyond his wildest dreams.

As the King set out once again on his travels he said to himself, "There's more in the story-teller's maxims than appears on the surface. Here's the truth of two more revealed. Had I not carried treasure on my person I should have been a rotting carcass in yonder forest. And woman's fidelity, ugh.....what's it but a broken reed?

"Now for the hand of Emperor Vikramaditya's daughter. What a great prize to strive for! If only I can conquer sleep..? That shouldn't be impossible, surely!"

After much wandering, the King appeared at the magnificent court of Vikramaditya. He was disguised in a Sanyasi's saffron robe. "O mighty Emperor," he addressed the monarch on the throne," I am here as a suitor for your daughter's hand. The fame of her beauty and her accomplishments has travelled to far-off lands. Gladly would I abjure my vows of celibacy and renounce this monkish garb if I can win her for wife."

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The Emperor's lips curled in a smile of mockery. "You little know the perils that beset your quest, holy man," he said. "Scores of stout men have perished in the attempt to win my daughter's hand. Go into her apartment tonight, if you will not be restrained by the awesome tales they tell. And if you are found alive at dawn, why, you may have the princess in marriage with my blessings too!"

No, that wasn't enough to daunt our hero. So an hour or two after nightfall he was conducted into the Princess's apartment. She was as lovely a damsel as one could ever hope to rest one's eyes on, and full of sweet, gentle ways. The hours sped by on magic wings as she kept up an endless and delicious patter. Then, as the gong in the palace courtyard struck the hour after midnight, her eyes grew heavy with sleep. She lay back, stretched her soft limbs, yawned in the most bewitching manner and, in a trice, was fast asleep.

In the loneliness of the night the King now strove with sleep. To win this fair prize he must fight and vanquish the leaden feeling that now crept into every pore of his body. He sensed the approach of a great danger, too. "Beware!" a voice seemed to say. Quick as lightning, he made up his clothes into a bundle, the shape of a man, laid it on the silken mattress beside the Princess, and crept into a dark corner to keep watch. His shaking hands closed on the hilt of his sword. O what a dreadful vigil it was!

Slowly the rosebud lips of the sleeping Princess parted. Then, as the King's blood seemed to freeze with horror, there issued from between those lips a monstrous serpent. It uncoiled its whole vicious length, reached its hood with a loud hiss and plunged its venomous fangs into the dummy beside the Princess.

In an instant, the King had mastered the quaking of his limbs. He slipped out of his corner, raised the sword on high and smote the fearful monster with every ounce of his strength. The serpent lay dead at his feet. He hacked it to pieces, gathered the mess in a heap under the couch, and then stretched his tired, aching limbs to rest.

At the hour of dawn, the Emperor's guards came, as was their wont, to carry yet another hapless suitor's corpse away. But they rubbed their eyes in wonder when the Sanyasi himself, whole of limb and with a cheerful grin, opened the door to their loud knocking.

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Vikramaditya himself came breathless to see the miracle. Had the curse on his fair daughter been lifted at last? When he heard the Sanyasi's grim tale and bent to look under the couch, he knew indeed that deliverance had come. "Now for the wedding!" he shouted as he embraced our hero.

"Not yet, my lord," said the Sanyasi," I have a few grave responsibilities to discharge; only then may I return to claim your daughter's hand." He then exchanged tokens with the Princess and took leave of the Emperor.

His mission accomplished, the King returned to his own kingdom amidst great popular rejoicings. Then he set forth again at the head of a shining retinue.

He first rode into the city where his sister reigned as queen. O what a splendid welcome he was accorded! But he had fetched the sealed dish of that other day. "Remember the mendicant whom you sent away from your door with this poor gift, sister?" he asked. And the poor queen grew red with shame, flung herself at her brother's feet and besought his forgiveness.

Next, he repaired to the city where his true friend dwelt. The good man wept tears of happiness to see the King restored to his former estate, as he thought. And the King told him the tale of wanderings and showered upon him a thousand marks of his affection and esteem.

Then he entered the city where his faithless consort abode with her father. He laid bare the story of her wickedness and of the sin of the Master of Horse. Poor wretches, what could they say when the executioner bore witness to their crimes. The erring queen's father put the lovers in chains and flung them into a deep dungeon.

And then, at last, at the head of a truly resplendent cavalcade, he rode into Vikramaditya's imperial city. The Emperor was transported with delight when he saw that his daughter's suitor was a king, no less. And the Princess rejoiced that her lord and master was no mere mendicant. The wedding was solemnized with a magnificence rarely equalled at the court.

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Thus ends the tale of the story-teller and his maxims. That wise man, you may be certain, was not forgotten. For he was summoned to Vikramaditya's great city, where riches and honours were heaped upon him.

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23
The Vizier's Son

"Last night, in a dream, I beheld the most enchanting princess," the Prince confided to the Vizier's son. They were inseparable companions, and neither had a secret he would not instantly share with the other. "She was strolling about in a garden where the breeze was laden with the perfume of sweet flowers," the prince went on. "Her loveliness took my breath away. She cast one lingering glance at my face, but not a word would she utter. My whole being longs for her, my friend. Whatever shall I do?"

Young as he was, the Vizier's son was full of wise stratagems. Was he not descended from a long line of Viziers whose exploits were the theme of legend and song?

"In what direction lay this garden of your dream?" he enquired.

"O, that's easy," replied the Prince, "I can recall every inch of the road I took to get into that garden."

"Set your mind at rest then," said the Vizier's son. "At daybreak tomorrow, we set forth along this same road. And we shall see what we shall see!"

On the morrow, the two friends rode out of the city, the Prince leading the way. When the sun hung low in the western sky, they reached a strange city. Marvelling greatly at the wide avenues and the handsome mansions on either side, they ambled on until they gained the entrance to the royal gardens.

Here they dismounted and crept inside, unnoticed by the sentries.

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The very first person on whom the Prince's eyes alighted was the Princess of his dream. She was even more ravishing than the apparition of the night before. Her lips, bent demurely over a sweet-smelling flower, were like rose buds. When she flashed a dazzling smile at the intruders from under her long, silken eye-lashes, the Prince quite lost his wits. But, even as in the dream, she would say naught. She only flung the flower in the direction of the moon-struck youth, tossed her golden curls, and daintily tripped out of sight.

With words of comfort and reassurance, the Vizier's son led the reluctant Prince out of the garden and found lodgings for the two of them in an ancient inn. "Take heart, my friend, I promise to fetch the Princess to you," he said.

Early next morning, the lad went out into the city and sought employment with the baker to the royal household. He worked diligently and fashioned delicious cakes of curious and bewitching patterns, especially for the Princess. No sooner did the Princess set eyes on the delicacies spread out before her than she sent for the baker. "These aren't your handiwork, surely!" she exclaimed.

'No, Your Highness,' the good man confessed. "A stranger and a stripling begged to work for me. It was his cunning hand that wrought these. These were for your special delectation, he kept on saying."

"Send him to me, quick!" the Princess ordered, almost forgetting herself in her excitement.

Presently, the Vizier's son, baker's apron and all, was ushered into her chamber. The Princess's questions came tumbling one upon another. The youth, smiling inwardly at her impetuous nature, told her all about the Prince, how he had been smitten by her beauty and how he lay pining for love in a squalid inn not a stone's throw from the palace.

"I despair for his life, sweet Princess," he lied stoutly, "Methinks" it is a sickness of the heart that only a smile from your compassionate eyes can heal."

The Princess, being of a tender disposition, was prevailed upon to visit this ardent youth. Though she would not admit it, she had taken

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a fancy to the Prince who had stared at her with the bulging eyes of a lovesick swain. "I'll be at the inn at the hour of midnight," she promised the Vizier's son.

When the Prince heard the glad tidings he was beside himself with happiness. In truth, the poor lad was so overwrought that when the hour of the Princess's visit struck, he was fast asleep in bed.

The early rays of the sun slanting into his apartment woke him up. As he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, he suddenly recollected the midnight assignation. He tumbled out of bed and ran to his friend's side, weeping: "The Princess.....oh!....oh!.....she broke her word after all!"

The Vizier's son was not to be taken in. However, he comforted the poor youth with kind, soothing words, and with deft fingers, meanwhile, turned out his pockets. Five glittering marbles and a dainty silk handkerchief with the Princess's crest embroidered upon it dropped out. His own handkerchief was missing. "Ha!" exclaimed the Vizier's son, wagging a finger," she was here right enough! Confess now...."

Here, the poor lad burst into a fit of sobbing. He was the biggest fool you could think of — lying asleep like an ox while his dream princess had come a-visiting!

"But, why these marbles?" he shot at his friend between two choking sobs.

"Ha, to remind you that you are still a baby!" ventured the Vizier's son with a hint of unkind mockery. "They are for you to play with!"

But his heart melted with pity as the Prince yielded to a fresh outburst of grief. He gently patted his friend on the shoulder, whispered words of courage and sallied forth again.

The baker's apprentice was soon face to face with a somewhat indignant Princess. How, indeed, could he make excuses for his friend? How could he mollify this lovely creature? She was stamping about the room, her silver anklets beating out an angry tune.

But the Vizier's son was as resourceful as he was determined. He pleased and cajoled as never before. By slow degrees, the princess was won over. The cloud of anger vanished from her brow. Her cheeks

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dimpling with smiles, she was promising to visit the Prince again at the hour of midnight.

You may be sure that this time the Prince was very wideawake when the fateful hour struck. The Princess looked more adorable than ever before. She bubbled over with laughter and kept up a continuous chatter about sweet nothings. And the prince, who couldn't take his eyes off her lovely countenance for a moment, bethought himself in very heaven.

But the Fates (alas!) were unkind to the poor innocent lovers. Jealous of their happiness, perhaps, they sent the Vizier of the kingdom prowling about that very quarter of the city. As he stood in the cobbled alleyway beside the inn, the tinkle of girlish laughter fell upon his ears. One hand astride his waist and the other stroking his moustache, he looked up. The voice that was wafted down to him — yes, it was not unfamiliar. "Ah, our naughty little Princess!" he exclaimed with a malicious flick of his fingers. Next moment, he broke in upon the lovers. "Here's a pretty kettle of fish!" he bellowed. At a signal from him, the city guards rushed in and hauled the two tender creatures away to prison.

The Vizier's son wrung his hands in despair when they brought him news of the tragedy. But his nimble wits were racing ahead with schemes. In the first flush of dawn he was hobbling along in the guise of an old woman, bent over a gnarled stick and carrying a basket of wheaten cakes on his head. At the prison gates the guards at first laughed at granny's importunity. She whined that she was on an errand of mercy. But presently they relented. If the kindly old soul must fetch food for the unfortunate creatures in their cell, who were they to say 'no'?

No sooner was the old woman inside than she sprang to life. It took her only two winks to gain the cell where his friends were confined. Between tears and laughter, the Princess quickly slipped on the disguise and then, bent double, hobbled past the gates under the very noses of the guards.

Two hours later, the Vizier dragged an incredulous King to this same prison-cell. "Your daughter, Sire!" he cried out triumphantly, pointing a finger at the lad swathed in the Princess's *pheran*. The king lifted the covered head-dress, scanned the face underneath and dis-

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covered that he had been put upon. What a stupid prank, and what a wicked slander against the child he so dearly cherished! Eyes blazing with fury, he turned on the Vizier with drawn sword, and before the wretch could bring out a single word of explanation, his head was rolling on the prison floor.

The Prince and the Vizier's son were set free, it is true. But of what avail was freedom when the whole city was ringing with the news that the Princess was soon to wed the king of neighbouring country? There was little our Vizier's son could do about that. For the Princess, notwithstanding all her protestations, had been betrothed long since. Today, the city was all aflutter.

Floral arches, banners and gay festoons seemed to have sprung up wherever one cast one's eyes.

Again, with a sinking heart, perhaps, the Vizier's son set about laying his plans. As baker's apprentice, he contrived to gain the ear of the Princess. His tongue had lost nothing of its cunning, his wits none of their sharpness. But could he accomplish a miracle in the little time left before the wedding day?

When the royal bridegroom arrived, our Princess was outwardly composed. On the day of the wedding, she was all that a bashful bride should be. A proper veil hid the glint of resolution in her eyes. The women of the palace fussed over her. There was music everywhere, and peal upon peal of merry laughter. Then came the priests and their tiresome ceremonial.

At last the time came for her to leave her parental home with her bridegroom. To the playing of pipes and the beating of drums, the gay procession made its way out of the city. The bride, in silk and brocade, was borne in a golden palanquin. Who could guess at the flutter in her little heart?

At the hour of dusk, they halted in a forest glade for the evening's repast. It all happened then in less time than it takes to tell. The Vizier's son, veiled from head to foot, slipped into the palanquin. The Princess stole away to where the lovelorn prince kept impatient vigil, to be caught up into his saddle and whisked off.

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The Vizier's son, as you may imagine, did not enjoy being couped up in the palanquin. Soon, however, the bridegroom' sister clambered in beside him. She, unsuspecting girl, had come out of pure kindness to keep the lonely bride company. The lad, as you know, was endowed with a tongue that could melt a stone; and when he found the maiden as lovely as she was intelligent, he laid siege to her heart. Before the party set up camp for the night he had scattered all her defences. She was willing, she confessed demurely, to follow him to the ends of the earth. So, under cover of darkness, he stole away with his prize to join the waiting Prince.

Early next day, the friends journeyed back to their own kingdom. O what a joyous welcome they received, for the parents, poor distracted souls, had almost given them up for lost!

And how much more was their gladness when they discovered that they had both fetched for themselves brides more beautiful than they could ever think of.

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24
The Treacherous Vizier

Bahadur Khan, King of Kashmir, was taking the air one evening in the garden set apart for the ladies of his harem. This was his private domain, where none might trespass. There was consternation, therefore, when a servant ran into the royal presence and, trembling, announced that a Faqir had strayed into this forbidden ground.

"Bring him before me," the King ordered his guards. Was he wrathful? His tone disclosed nothing. Only a faint smile played about his lips.

It was a saintly old man they dragged before Bahadur Khan. "What harm have I done, Your Majesty?" he asked in a voice full of gentleness.

Before the King could answer the holy man dropped down, apparently dead. Even as the King and his courtiers were gasping with horror, a dead parrot lying in a flower-bed nearby stirred to life. It fluttered its wings for a moment and then flew away into the sky, chirping merrily. They had hardly recovered from their stupefaction at these wondrous happenings when the parrot flew back into the garden and dropped dead at their feet. A tremor seemed to pass through the Faqir's lifeless spine, and in a second he was up on his feet, smiling as if nothing at all had happened.

Bahadur Khan and his Vizier threw themselves at the Faqir's feet, for they understood he was truly a saint endowed with miraculous power. The Faqir, pleased with their submission and moved by their entreaty, instructed them in the secret of this miracle.

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Time passed by. One day while the King and his Vizier were out hunting together in the forests, they saw, lying dead in their path, a parrot with the liveliest plumage one could ever hope to see. A great longing came upon Bahadur Khan to see this magnificent bird on the wing. Here was the moment, too, to try the skill they had been taught. "Do enter the parrot's body," he begged of his Vizier. But the Vizier, for once, would not, obey the royal behest. The more the King urged and pleaded the more adamant did the Vizier become. Was there just a suspicion of defiance on his countenance, the King wondered? But in his burning eagerness to watch the bird come to life, he dismissed the thought with a shrug. "Well, let me do it myself," he muttered. It was a moment's work. Bahadur Khan lay dead on the ground! His spirit had wandered into the body of the parrot and the bird was beating its wings in the open spaces of the sky.

The Vizier's eyes glittered and his thin lips twisted in a wicked grin of satisfaction. Here was the very moment for which he had long lain in wait. No sooner was the bird out of slight than he cast off his own body and entered the King's. He was now Bahadur Khan King of the fair realm of Kashmir. Lest the real King should ever seek to return to court, he summoned his guards and ordered the Vizier's corpse to be chopped to little bits and scattered to the winds. He issued a royal command too that all parrots found in the kingdom be killed forthwith. His subjects would receive a handsome reward for every bird they destroyed.

As the Vizier-King (as we must now call him) rode back to the capital in triumph, the King-parrot, discovering the cruel trick played upon him, flew to the Faqir's hermitage for refuge. "Do not be impatient, my son," the holy man stroked the bird and comforted him. "Allah is All-Seeing and deals out justice to all creatures."

Time rolled on. The Vizier-King was out a-hunting in the forest one day, when a hind of exceeding beauty streaked past in a flash of colour. He spurred his steed and set out in chase. Never yet had he ridden so fast, so relentlessly — but not an inch did he gain on his quarry. "What a shame to let the hind escape!" he exclaimed bitterly as he felt his horse stumble under him.

On a sudden his eyes fell on the carcass of a Panther lying in his path. "A panther is fleeter than the nimblest hind," he muttered. Quick as lightning he cast off his body and entered the panther's to track the animal down.

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Haven't you guessed it was all the wise Faqir's doing? The King-parrot was, you may be sure, close by, waiting to dart upon this opportunity. It was done in the twinkling of an eye. The parrot dropped dead, and Bahadur Khan had entered his own body that the Vizier had thoughtlessly abandoned in a moment of madness. Little did his courtiers realize that here was the true Bahadur Khan restored to his former state.

The King now sent out hunters to capture the panther alive and rode back to his palace.

Next morning the Vizier-panther was wheeled in a wooden cage into the King's presence. "Is that my Vizier?" Bahadur Khan inquired mockingly. "Surely, I could not allow a denizen of the jungle to sit in office and offer counsel. No, that would not do at all!" And with a loud guffaw, he ordered his guards to roast the beast alive. That was the end of the treacherous Vizier.

Bahadur Khan lived happily ever after. And, I am sure, he never again attempted the miracle of spirit transference! "Much too risky to try," he might have argued. "And besides I am too old now to go gadding about. To live as King of this fair Valley in security is by far a more pleasant business altogether!"

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25

The Magic Ring

Gulzar was nearly twenty years of age, strong of limb and pleasing to look upon. "Time to put Gulzar's wits and enterprise to the test," his father said to himself. He was a merchant of fabulous wealth; but he wished to reassure himself that his son would carry on worthily after he was gone from this transitory world.

"Here are two hundred pieces of silver, my son," said the merchant to Gulzar, handing him a purse. "Go forth into the world. Seek out men of high integrity and keen business acumen. There is much you can learn in their company by employing your eyes and ears wisely."

Gulzar set out, whistling a lively tune, without a single care in the world. Late in the afternoon, he entered the market-place of a neighbouring town and observed, in one corner, four men engaged in a brawl. It was all over a cat that had wrought havoc among their poultry, and the men were quarrelling over the best means of dealing with the offender. Gulzar watched the poor little animal cowering in terror at their feet, and took pity on it. "Do sell me the cat," he pleaded, "here are a hundred pieces of silver to seal the bargain." The wrangling was soon at an end, for the men were little loth to set the wretched brute free in return for so much wealth. Gulzar picked up the cat and proceeded on his travels.

A few miles ahead, on the outskirts of a little hamlet, the lad came upon an excited group of rustics about to kill a snake. Again, Gulzar's heart melted with pity, for he was of a very tender disposition. "Just a moment," he shouted. "Let the poor creature go, and I'll give you a hundred pieces of silver in return." This princely offer, as you might imagine, did the trick.

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Here was our young hero now with all his money gone and with two strange pets on his hand. How could he pursue his travel? "Well, I can do no better than turn back," he argued within himself.

When Gulzar presented himself before his father, the old man flew into a violent temper. At sight of the pets his son had come by at such expense, he was further convulsed with rage. "You are more of a donkey than I feared. Out of my sight! Never darken my doors again".

The poor boy could not guess what he had done to merit his father's wrath. He dragged along with a blank look on his face. There was nowhere he could take shelter. So, towards the distant stables he bent his sorrowful steps. Throwing himself full length on the piled-up hay, Gulzar wept his heart out.

As night fell and the boy dropped into a fitful slumber, his pets kept vigil beside him. The snake spread its hood out above his head, and the cat scurried after the mice that would scratch and nibble at his body.

Next morning, when Gulzar woke up, tired and aching in every limb, the snake reared itself up and addressed him. "Come to my father's spring, Master," it said. "Let us visit him in the caverns deep under the waters. You have given me the boon of my life, and may well ask him for something to requite you for it."

They dived below the deep waters and entered the Serpent King's domain, and the Lord of the Snakes demanded of Gulzar what he would accept as a token of his gratitude. The lad answered promptly, "Your magic ring, my lord, if you will part with it." That was at his pet snake's whispered prompting. How could the Serpent-King say 'no'?

Presently, Gulzar, dripping wet, emerged from the spring, grasping the magic ring in his hand.

They repaired then to a lovely site on the banks of a stream nearly, and there Gulzar, at the snake's bidding, let the sun's rays flash upon the gem set in the ring. On the instant, there was a gorgeous palace where they stood, furnished with every luxury you could ever want, and liveried servants to attend on you. In the innermost apartment

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was a bewitching, golden-haired maiden, crooning a sweet love-song. Gulzar took her as wife and lived in the fashion of a prince, happy as the day was long.

Many months passed by. One morning as the fairy Princess was combing her golden hair by the river bank, one shining strand dropped into the water and was swiftly carried downstream. It happened to fall into the hands of the king of a neighbouring country, disporting himself in the waters of the river. No sooner had he set eyes on it than he straightaway vowed to himself that he would have none other for his queen than the maiden of this golden hair. But who she was he couldn't discover for many months, though he sent out scouts abroad in every direction of the compass. So the poor King sickened of love and grew thinner and thinner and thinner, with a fierce desire consuming his heart.

At last they fetched his old aunt to his beside, a witch as wise and crafty as she was cruel. "Take heart, my child", she adjured the King. "You will have the princess you are pining for."

She changed herself by one of her mysterious spells into an eagle and scoured the country far and wide.

After long wandering, she came to the country where Gulzar lived with his princess. Here was the end of her restless seeking. She changed herself back into the wrinkled old woman that she was and entered the apartments of the princess. "Ah, my child, how lovely you look, and what a fine husband you have found!" she exclaimed by way of greeting "Now, don't tell me you don't know your own aunt," she added, wagging her finger mischievously in answer to the Princess's look of astonishment.

So clever and so full of tricks was this witch that she had soon won the Princess over. It was easy, too, to persuade the foolish, unsuspecting bride to let her inspect the magic ring. But no sooner was this priceless treasure in her hand than the wicked old woman changed herself again into an eagle and soared away.

As the King lay groaning on his sick-bed, the witch hobbled into the room. She thrust the magic ring into his fevered hand, soothed his forehead and whispered into his ear. Then it all happened in the twinkling of an eye. As the sun's rays flashed upon the gem in the ring,

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the palace came floating in the air, princess and all, to where the King stood. With a heart beating fast, he crossed the threshold, fell on his knees before the lovely, golden-haired damsel, and asked her to marry him.

What could the poor maiden say to this? She was a bit dazed after her flight across the sky. And her husband was nowhere in sight. But a slender hope fluttered in her heart. "Well, this is too sudden, my lord!" she protested. "But give me a month's time, I promise to think the matter over!" The poor King, who was dazzled by her beauty, was content to wait. At least she was safe in his own country, and he could surely gaze upon her face and still the turbulence of his spirit.

When poor Gulzar returned from the hunt on that fateful day, he rubbed his eyes in amazement. Where was his palace, and where his own lovely princess? He threw himself on the hard stony ground in a fit of sobbing.

With friendly meeaow, his pet cat rubbed its velvet skin against Gulzar's face. "Take comfort, master," it purred softly. "I'll do whatever I can to help you out." Then it was off with a leap and a bound.

When the cat reached the palace after a long and seemingly endless journey, it was well past midnight. Whom should it then encounter but the King of Rats himself? It pounched upon him and shook him until he whined and squeaked for mercy. "I'll let you go," the cat said, "if you promise to fetch me the magic ring."

To the King of Rats nothing is really impossible. He is full of wisdom and master of a thousand wiles. Was he perturbed when his servants came round with the story that the witch had swallowed the ring lest it should ever fall into the hands of the King's enemies? He pondered the problem for an hour or two, and then tripped out of his retreat, chuckling to himself.

While the witch lay snoring, the Rat thrust his tail deep down her throat and set up a veritable devil dance. Well, you will guess what happened. The poor old woman jumped out of her bed, clasped her temples in her hands and coughed out all the contents of her stomach. What a mess it was, and what a dismal noise she made! There was the magic ring, too, in what she had brought out. Before the old woman

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could realize what was happening, the Rat had snatched it up and was out of sight.

The cat accepted the precious ring with plenty of bowing and scraping and hurried back to its master. Well, the rest is simple. The palace, and the Princess too, were back in the palace. Gulzar was reunited to his Princess and they lived happily ever after.

As for the witch, she stormed and stamped in her rage until she dropped dead, poor thing. What happened to her royal nephew, the story does not tell.

But you may be sure Gulzar would never again part with the ring, not for the whole world.

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26

The Wily Dervish Meets His Fate

There was once in the kingdom of Kashmir, a Dervish famed throughout the land for his learning and piety. Disciples from all over the country flocked round this holy, man to listen to his teaching and to minister to his needs.

One evening, a certain disciple approached the Dervish, bowed his head before the master and, with tears in his eyes, implored his help. "Sire," he cried out, "my daughter is now come of age. But, alas, where shall I find the wherewithal for her dower? Wretch that I am, who will take a beggar's daugher for his bride?"

The Dervish appeared to be lost in thought for a minute or two. "Go home, my son," he then gently advised the poor man. "All will be well. Infinite is Allah's mercy! Tomorrow I will invoke His blessings upon your child."

Early next afternoon, the disciple was nearly startled out of his wits to see the great Dervish himself standing at his door. In a moment, the little household was in the wildest bustle you could think of. Did one ever hear of such high honour? They dusted an ancient and tattered carpet and spread it out for the guest. They plied him with delicious sweets to eat and sherbet to drink. The mistress of the house ran hither and thither on a hundred errands, chattering away in a delirium of excitement.

When the Dervish had rested awhile, his host led his daughter, Fatima, into the holy man's presence She approached with all the bashfulness becoming to a maiden and touched the feet of the Dervish, who, thereupon, placed his hands upon her head in token of his blessing.

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After all the rest had withdrawn, the Dervish addressed the disciple. "Listen, my son," he said with more than his wonted solemnity. "You are poor, but your child will, nevertheless, find a bridegroom worthy of her great beauty. God's ways are mysterious. We poor mortals must place unquestioning trust in Him and carry out His injunctions."

"It all came to me in a vision last night — what you must do that your daughter may win happiness," the Dervish went on. "Pay heed. You'll have need for high courage and boundless faith. Place your daughter in a wooden box, close it down securely and seal it. At the hour of dusk tomorrow, cast this box into the river and let it drift downstream — so will your child be carried to her destiny. When you have done, repair to the solitude of your room and spend the hours of the night in prayer. Again, put all your trust in the All-Merciful and be of good cheer!" So saying, the master departed.

This Dervish, as you may have guessed already, was far from the holy man people reckoned him to be. His heart was full of wickedness, and his subtle brain teemed with snares and stratagems. Fatima was a comely maiden, radiant as the full moon. When the Dervish looked upon her loveliness, he had been smitten with lust. "I'll take her for my own bride," he had vowed to himself. No sooner had this sinful thought seized him than his plot was hatched, for he had a nimble and resourceful wit.

Now, back in his own hut, he clapped his hands to summon the rest of his disciples. "A great task awaits us, tomorrow, my children," he said, when they were gathered round him. "Satan will go drifting down the river that runs past our village about the hour of sunset. Yes..... imprisoned in a big, black, wooden box, floating downstream. Assemble on the wooden bridge yonder, seize the box and carry it into my room. I shall deal with Satan, alone, behind barred doors, as is the way to deal with him. Stand outside, beat drums, blow trumpets and chant loud prayers in unison, for only thus may the power of Satan be utterly overthrown. Doubtless, he will shriek, and storm and rave. Who knows what scurvy tricks he'll try, what fiendish commotion he will raise! But pay no heed whatsoever; only drown his unholy noise in the sound of sacred music. I charge you, be bold of spirit and breathe no word of this secret adventure abroad".

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So, that is done, the wily Dervish thought.

About sunset next day, Fatima's father, credulous fool that he was, carried out his master's instructions to the letter. Almost fainting with terror, the poor girl was borne helplessly, by slow and imperceptible stages, towards the bridge.

But the Fates were kind to Fatima. In a pleasant grove by the riverside, not far from the spot where the box had been pushed off on its perilous voyage, was the Prince of a neighbouring country, reclining after a long day's hunting. He cast his eyes lazily on the waters and espied this curious object. "What can this be?" he wondered.

In a moment, the box had been fished out and broken open. Then the Prince stepped back in wonder as Fatima, still trembling with fear, but looking as bewitching as a fairy princess, rose unsteadily to her feet. It all happened in a whirl after that. The Prince promised to take Fatima to wife and she, reeling with happiness, was soon pouring her tale into his eager ears.

"Ah a villain forsooth!" the Prince muttered, for he was no fool. "I'll teach the rascally Dervish the lesson he deserves!" He fetched one of his fiercest bloodhounds, thrust him into the box and fastened the lid down. Then he sent this strange cargo spinning down the current towards the bridge. When that was done, he set out with Fatima. For Fatima, indeed, the Dervish, black as his heart might be, had prophosised truly.

Down by the bridge, a little while later, stout hands were laid on the drifting wooden box. By nightfall the Dervish was alone in his room, all doors bolted and the precious treasure, as he thought, in front of him.

Picture the rest for yourself: the maddened hound leaping at the Dervish's throat and the fierce unavailing struggle as the wretch was torn from limb to limb. As for the disciples keeping watch outside, what indeed were they to do? The master's orders had been strict. The louder he shrieked in his death agony, the higher rose the beat of drums, the blare of trumpets and the wail of prayers !

The wicked Dervish's sin had come home to roost!

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27

The Tailor and the Jinns

A tailor and a weaver once set out on a long journey together They were looking for a country where they could earn much higher wages than their money-grabbing townsmen would pay. To remain for ever poor was wearisome, and visions of great wealth swam before their eyes as they pushed steadily on.

But after two days of painful trudging, the weaver's spirits flagged, his heart sickened with thoughts of home and comfort. Somewhat sheepishly, he turned to his companion. "I dreamed last night of my wife and children", he whined, "and they seemed to cry out for me. I do think I must turn back."

"So you must, indeed, my friend," the tailor readily agreed.

As the tailor now plunged forward alone, he swung the emblems of his trade bravely before him, his metal yardstick in one hand and his large pair of scissors in the other. That seemed to give him courage.

By and by, as darkness fell, he came to a thick forest. The trees here shot up straight into the sky, and all round arose fearful sounds that chilled him to the marrow. What could the poor tailor do? He tried banging the tree-trunks with his yardstick and brandishing his scissors as though it were a sword. That helped a little.

He had not made much progress before he perceived in the gathering darkness, right in front of him, a ladder propped up against a tree taller than the rest. "Ha, now indeed I may clamber up into safety for the night," he murmured to himself as he set his feet on the firm, inviting rungs. Up and up he went. There were more rungs, and ever more. "I might find myself in heaven with all this climbing!" the

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wretched man moaned. His feet dragged painfully and he breathed hard. But when he was about to give up this fruitless adventure, he touched what appeared to be solid, wooden flooring. What a relief! He peered unsteadily into the blackness and espied some distance away a wooden cabin with a faint beam of light showing through a crack in the door.

Even as the tailor's thoughts hovered around visions of food and a bed to stretch his tired limbs on, there was an ominous rumble. The door of the cabin was flung open and out stepped the most ferocious-looking Jinn you could imagine. Eyes like saucers, a cruel hooked nose, teeth like a wild beast's fangs, a wide, cavernous mouth. The floor groaned under his weight and his voice rolled out like thunder. "Hr. m.ph...gr..r.r... What brings you here?" he demanded.

"Not a friendly greeting!" muttered the tailor to himself. He was shaking like a leaf in a gale, of course, though luckily that escaped the Jinn's notice. But he was a brave man for his size, and his wits were as sharp as the sharpest needle he had used. In a trice, he had steadied himself.

"Er.. I am frightfully sorry to trouble you," he brought out in level tones. "But my master, the great Lord Solomon, will have only the best hide for his winter robe. If you will excuse me, I must rip the skin off you" (here he snipped his scissors viciously) "and measure it out for a coat" (with a menacing flourish of the yardstick).

"O-o-o-h," the Jinn groaned and stepped back. It was now his turn to shiver. For all his hulking body, his brains were smaller than a sparrow's ! "No, no," he wheedled, "perhaps you might seek elsewhere? I shall, of course,...er, make it worth your while."

The tailor's clever stratagem had worked; he was beside himself with relief. He now solemnly pretended to revolve the Jinn's offer in his mind. "Well, well," he whispered like a conspirator, "... I might, you know." But the Jinn had disappeared into his cabin. He was back in the winking of an eye carrying a bag of gold coins and a fistful of glittering gems that he thrust into the tailor's hands. "Now if that will do, take yourself off elsewhere and leave me in peace," he implored, and nearly pushed the bewildered tailor off the tree-top.

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As for our hero, he hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or his feet. He spent the night at the foot of the tree, clutching his precious treasure. When day dawned he was hurrying homeward.

Back in his town, what should the tailor do but display his wealth and strut about like a prince! They were all stunned, the good townfolk, and none more so than the weaver who had deserted him on the outskirts of the forest. One evening he sidled up to his friend and coaxed the story out of him.

The weaver's eyes bulged with wonder as the tailor unfolded his wondrous tale. Why, they must set out again. Perhaps there was countless wealth for the mere asking, and the Jinns, poor things, were such awful nitwits!

The tailor, now grown arrogant, hardly needed much persuasion, and so one fine morning the two fared forth in search of the Jinns' secret hoard.

After three weary days of journeying, the friends found themselves in the self-same forest. It was pitch dark when they reached the foot of the ladder.

Panting for breath, they gained the very top. But how utterly still things were! Not a breath issued from the cabin. Instead, on a sudden, there arose a spine-chilling din from below.

When the two friends peered down, a most frightful spectacle met their eyes. More than a score of Jinns were seated on their haunches round a sacrificial fire, chanting, all together, a prayer to lord Solomon. What a horrible noise they set up! A thin, old priest, meanwhile, poured oblations into the fire.

The weaver lost his nerve and toppled over the edge, right into the circle of Jinns. It was lucky the tailor kept his presence of mind. With ready wit he yelled out as loud as his lungs would permit, "Quick, round them up, round them up! I'll be down in a moment with scissors and yardstick. Quick!"

Pandemonium was let loose at the foot of the tree. Yelling and screaming, fighting and scratching, the Jinns fled helter-skelter into

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the forest. The poor priest fell down in a dead faint. The tailor scrambled down and saw beside the prostrate priest a large sack of gold and a heap of precious stones. It was a moment's work to help the shaking weaver to his feet. The two then collected all that they could lay their hands on, and before daybreak turned tired footsteps homeward.

There was wealth beyond the wildest dreams of avarice in the bag. They shared it equally between themselves and settled down to a life of plenty and ease.

And the wondering townsmen, who had heard whispered tales, pointed to them in the street and nudged one another, "There go the two valiant men who conquered the Jinns of the forest!"

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28

The Son-in-law Abroad

Ganpat was newly married. His wife was at her father's whereto he was invited to spend a holiday. As he bustled with the preparations, his mother admonished him: "My son, be heavy (serious) at your father-in-law's. Take a high place to sit on at the feast."

When Ganpat was about to leave for the long journey, she handed to him an old *vari* (a small earthen narrow-necked jug), saying, "Take this *vari* and drop into it the things that you can spare for your mother who will pine for you till you return."

A long journey on foot lay before Ganpat. A stream crossed his path. He sat on the bank and pondered on his mother's instructions. "I have to be heavy there," he repeated to himself. A broken mill-stone came in his sight. His puzzle was solved. He passed a rope through the hole of the stone and hung it from his neck. Greatly satisfied, he said to himself, "Now, by the grace of God, I am heavy."

Ganpat's wife, his father-in-law and friends of the family were shocked at the mill-stone slung over his shoulder and at his haggard and fantastic appearance. Well, that was the toll of the day's march over hill and dale, they thought. But no one dared laugh at him, lest he should be insulted. Ganpat led the guests to the room. He was the first to enter. Providentially remembering his mother's words, he sat on a ledge parallel to the window sill. From that elevated position, he easily ordered the servants about, who washed his feet. His wife and mother-in-law were burning with shame at his superior airs.

Dinner was served. After two or three mouthfuls, Ganpat would put in eatables in the *vari* which he concealed within his *pheran* — the long-sleeved Kashmiri gown.

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About to finish his meal, he found that his hand got stuck inside the narrow neck of the *vari*. Just then his father-in-law told him, "Mr. Ganpat, you have finished. Won't you wash your hands? "Embarrassed, he returned, "No, I don't wash my hands. I just wipe them against the sleeves of my *pheran*."

Ganpat and father-in-law slept in a balcony. The moon shone overhead. Still, he had not succeeded in extricating his hand from the *vari*. In the dead of the night, he tried to help himself out of the difficulty. In so doing, he made some sounds which awoke his father-in-law. Rubbing his eyes, his father-in-law looked about in the moonlight and mistook the *vari* to be a big cat. He took a stone and hurled it at the object. The *vari* broke into a thousand pieces. Small pieces of meat were thrown on all sides. Ganpat got the greatest shock of his life. He fled downstairs and took refuge in the stable.

Meanwhile, his wife was awakened by the noise. She came to the balcony and seeing the scattered pieces of cooked meat, bewailed "God help me! My husband is dead." She thought that her husband had been attacked by a prowling panther and the strewn flesh was from his body.

Ganpat heard the hullabaloo in the stable. There, by mischance, a thief was prowling. The thief took him to be a sheep, lifted him bodily and after coshing him ran away with him upon his shoulders. A mile further, Ganpat, who had recovered by now shouted in the ear of his kidnapper, "You know, I am Ganpat, the honoured son-in-law."

The thief heard no more but dropped him down, shouting "Ghost! Ghost! the ghost has possessed my sheep..."

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29

The Goldsmith's Wife

Once upon a time there lived a handsome goldsmith in the fair capital of Kashmir. He was the head of his guild and was very popular. And, mind you, he was the royal goldsmith. When he made ornaments for the royal household, his wife used to take them to the palace.

One day the Princess said to the goldsmith's wife, "Let the goldsmith himself come here." And, so he did. When he displayed the shining ornaments before her, she pouted her lips and said, "These trinkets are no good." But their eyes met and they fell in love with each other.

Reaching home, the goldsmith found no rest. His clever wife understood the cause of his sickenss. She asked him to forge two golden balls and to throw them into the chamber of the Princess. When he did so, the Princess peered out of the window, showed him a mirror, poured water in the drain and threw a nosegay at him. He could not understand her gesture. Coming back home, he consulted his wife.

She said to him, "When the Princess showed you a mirror, she meant that someone else was in the room. When she threw the water, she wanted you to come through the drain. Indicated by the nosegay, the meeting place was to be her rose garden."

Next evening, accordingly, the goldsmith went into the garden. There he lay on a bed. The cool breeze from the cascades lulled him to sleep. The Princess came out but he did not wake up. In the morning, he returned home, disappointed. Seeing him woebegone, his wife said, "Let me search your pockets." She found the two golden balls. The goldsmith then understood that the Princess had come into the garden while he slept.

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Once again, the goldsmith made preparations to enter the private garden of the Princess in the night. His wife pared his nails but gave one a slash and it bled. He was angry with her, but she said, "Am I a barber that I should not go wrong when handling the razor?"

She gave him a packet admonishing him that should he fall asleep that night he should put the powder on the nail as it would "soothe the pain." The credulous goldsmith did not know that the packet contained powdered pepper and salt.

The goldsmith felt asleep in the garden. So he opened the packet and sprinkled its contents on the hurt finger. The 'medicine' only caused him pain. Sleep forsook him. But all this was a blessing in disguise.

The lovely Princess came and found him awake this time. They made love to each other till the small hours and then fell asleep in each other's arms. At dawn the chief constable found them and arrested them. They were thrown inside the palace jail and were to be produced before the King in the judgement hall in the afternoon.

When the goldsmith's wife heard of her husband's detention in the jail, she went there. She was carrying a huge basket containing loaves on her head. She got the jailor's permission to distribute the loaves among the prisoners. Reaching the cell of her husband and the Princess, she made the Princess exchange her clothes with her own. She also inverted the empty basket on the Princess to hide her face. The Princess's disguise thus complete, she left the jail unnoticed.

The King of Kashmir sat on the throne in the judgement hall. He commanded that the Princess and the goldsmith be produced before him. Lo! it was the goldsmith and his wife. The case was dropped against the goldsmith. But the palace constable lost his job.

After some time the King gave the right of *Soyambar* to his daughter so that she could choose in an open *durbar* the man she desired to marry. Advised by his wife and dressed for the occasion, the goldsmith took his place among the suitors. The Princess garlanded him in the *durbar*. So she was married to him. The goldsmith's first wife was still faithful to him and he gave her the first place in his household.

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30

Princess of the Saffron City

Returning from a hunt in the countryside, a young prince and the son of the Wazir (the prime minister) gave chase to a fox as far as the city. The Prince aimed an arrow at the game but it missed the target and instead hit and injured a nobleman's wife. The King, when he came to know of it, was full of wrath and banished both the Prince and the Wazir's son.

The friends broke the first day's journey in a mountain hamlet. They were lodged in the tower of an apparently hospitable man. At about midnight, they detected that their room was bolted from outside. Growing suspicious, the Wazir's son improvised a rope-ladder and they climbed out of the window. In the backyard they saw a pit rotting with corpses of men. So they made haste to escape the clutches of the savage robbers who lived in the tower.

The next halt of the two travellers was the green bank of a lake. Feeling thirsty, the Prince went down the steps of the ghat to drink water. There, on the opposite bank, he saw a most comely maid. Tantalisingly, she showed him a saffron flower and then disappeared. The Prince fell madly in love with her. But what could he do, now that she was no more to be seen? The Vazir's resourceful son gave him the clue that the saffron flower, waved by the maid, indicated that she was the Princess of the Saffron City.

That romantic city, resplendent with saffron fields in full blossom, was near at hand. Thither the two friends went and took abode with an old widow. She had access to the palace and through her the Wazir's son had the Princess informed of their arrival. Her reply came directly when the widow returned to her home in a magic swing.

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The Prince and the Wazir's son used the magic device to meet the Princess during the dark fortnight. She secretly made love to the Prince and wanted him to live with her permanently. The following night, the Wazir's son got ready three fast steeds and they ran away from the city with the Princess.

Reaching the borders of their own country, the Vazir's son sent word to the King and his own father, the Wazir, telling them all about their adventures and the Princess. But the King would not have them back unless the Princess was married to the Prince with the consent of her father. So the Wazir's son despatched express messengers on horseback to the father of the Princess. That King's anxiety about the disappearance of his daughter was changed to great joy when he heard that she would be married to the Prince of a large kingdom. He readily gave his assent and invited the Prince and the Wazir's son to return to his kingdom with the Princess.

The Prince was married to the Princess with great pomp and show. The Wazir of the Saffron City gave his fair daughter to the Wazir's son with whom she was wed. The Prince and the Wazir's son returned with a large retinue, richly loaded with presents. The Wazir's son took good care to destroy the tower of robbers and to have the gang executed. The King and the Wazir gave a warm welcome to their sons.

On his father's death, the Prince ascended the throne. Aided by the Wazir's son, now his Wazir, he ruled justly for many years. His prosperous, large kingdom, included the Saffron City, for the Princess was the only daughter of her father and he, having no other issue, bequeathed his kingdom to his son-in-law, the happy, wise monarch.

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31

The Pandit and the Pathan

A swaggering Pathan, very much conscious that he belonged to the ruling race of Kashmir, sauntered along a street of the capital city. Among a crowd of Pandits, he saw a Pandit youth whose moustache was gummed and upturned like his own.

It was an insult to the Pathan that a subject should so groom his moustache as to look like a fierce-looking Pathan. He beckoned the Pandit and stopped him, saying in a commanding tone, "Why is your moustache pointed upwards?"

The other Kashmiris seeing that the warrior was angry with one of them, fled away, but the Pandit with the challenged moustache said, "After all, the moustache is my own and I thought I could grow it as I please."

"No, that cannot be", roared the Pathan in righteous anger, "you have no right to shape your moustache after the manner of the imperial race, the fomidable Pathans".

That impressed the Pandit. Still, he was bold enough to say, "Why?"

"You ask, why?" — the Pathan stamped his foot on the road. "People must not think that you are as bold and brave as a Pathan."

"But I may be," interrupted the Pandit, in an undertone.

This pert remark greatly upset the Pathan who drew his sword and challenged the Pandit to a duel to decide who really was the braver of the two.

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Seeing the flashing blade the Pandit drew back a few steps. Meekly, he addressed the Pathan, "Pathan Sahib, firstly, I have no sword with me. Secondly, I am aware that in the duel either of us will be killed. The survivor may even be disabled. I shall go home to fetch my sword. I will also kill all members of my family so that I've no worry later as to who will be the breadwinner when I die."

That gave the brave Pathan a mighty idea. He said, "Yes, I will also go home to kill all members of my family."

They fixed the time of the duel and each left for his home. The Pathan did as he said, killing all members of his family, including a baby.

The Pandit went home only to unloosen the gum on his moustache. He had a merry chat with his wife and children. He even forgot to get a sword with him to the venue of the duel.

The Pathan was already there. He was rubbing dry the spots of blood on his sword.

Seeing that his adversary bore no sword, the Pathan shouted, "Now, what is that, Pandit? Where is your sword? You know you have come for a duel with a scion of the imperial race."

The Pandit, replied slyly, "What is all this pother about? Look here, my moustache is no longer upturned. So we make up our quarrel".

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32

Sohanpari

Long long ago there lived a Raja. He had two children — a boy and a girl. The Rajkumar was a brave youngman and the Rajkumari was very pretty.

The royal parents were proud of their daughter. She was very shapely, had lotus-shaped eyes and wavy hair. They had named her Sohanpari. She had grown fast like a lotus. The Raja, Rani and the Rajkumar loved Sohanpari dearly but her sister-in-law (the Rajkumar's wife) somehow hated Sohanpari and would pick at her on the least excuse.

Days passed by. One day the Rani told the Raja, "Maharaj! We have had enough of domestic bliss. Let us go on a pilgrimage."

The suggestion appealed to the Raja. He gave orders for making the appropriate preparations. He entrusted the duties of the administration to his son. While leaving, the Raja again entreated the Rajkumar to take special care of his sister, so that she did not have any discomfort. Then, the Raja and Rani left on the pilgrimage.

In Duggar Desh, unmarried girls celebrate 'Rado' festival in the month of *Sawan*. (The girls whether in a rural community or in a town, gather at a spot and sink broken earthen pots in the earth and then sow the seasonal seeds in them. They colour these in different designs and sing songs. They have a community meal at the bank of a nearby stream or tank. This is called *Rutt*.)

Sohanpari wanted to participate in the *Rutt*. She asked her sister-in-law to give *Oodni* (festive dupatta) but she refused to give her one. She said to Sohanpari in anger, "Go, ask your brother, whose darling

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sister you are, to buy you new *Oodni*. How dare you ask me to give you the *Oodni* given to me by my parents!"

Sohanpari was astounded at this reply from her sister-in-law. Her lovely lotus eyes were filled to the brim with tears.

When the Rajkumar heard that his wife had refused to give the *Oodni* to Sohanpari, he was quite angry. He rebuked his wife and forced her to give the *Oodni* to the Rajkumari.

Sohanpari draped the *Oodni* in excitement and left the palace to take part in *Rutt*. But, on her return, a kite, flying high above her, poured its excrement on her *Oodni*. The Rajkumari was very much upset.

When her sister-in-law saw that the *Oodni*, which was her heir-loom from her parents, had got indelible spots, she was furious. She was so much beside herself at this loss that she went on a protest fast. She took a vow that until she would wash off the spots of the *Oodni* with Sohanpari's blood, she would not touch any food.

The Rajkumar was hoodwinked by her wicked stance and, getting ready to take his sister's life to placate his wife, he stopped loving her, He told Sohanpari that he would take her to her maternal uncle's palace for a change. They set out on the journey. Instead of taking Sohanpari to her uncle's house, the Rajkumar led her to a lone spot in a jungle. There, with one stroke of his sword, he severed Sohanpari's neck. He collected her blood in an earthen pot. Then, he dug a ditch and buried her. And, carrying the pitcher containing her blood, he went back to the palace. His wife dyed her *Oodni* with this blood.

After some time, the Raja and Rani returned from their pilgrimage. They did not find Sohanpari in the palace. When they asked the Rajkumar about her, he replied simply, "She has gone to maternal uncle's house."

The Raja sent a trusted soldier to fetch Sohanpari. The road to the uncle's house lay through the very forest where the Rajkumari was buried.

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The soldier saw a mango tree laden with fruit. He pulled a branch and was about to pluck the fruit when he heard a pathetic moan from the tree:

O soldier of my father!
Don't pluck the mangoes,
Don't twist the branches!
Real brother has murdered his blood-sister!
So that the sister-in-law dyes her
Oodni with her blood!

The soldier was intrigued and returned to the palace. He narrated the incident to the Raja.

The Raja was shaken by the story. He took the soldier along and reached the same spot. When he tried to pluck a mango, the same moan was repeated:

O, Sohan's father!
Don't pluck the mangoes,
Don't twist the branches!
Real brother has murdered his blood-sister!
So that the sister-in-law dyes her
Oodni with her blood!

The Raja had the mango tree uprooted. A hole was dug up. There lay the dead body of Sohanpari— as if in deep sleep.

The Raja burst into tears. Some of his tears fell on Sohanpari's face. Uttering the words "Ram! Ram!" she became alive again. She stood upright in front of her happy father, rubbing her eyes, as if nothing had happened to her.

The Raja was happy beyond expectations and returned home with his beloved daughter. An order was issued immediately to arrest the Rajkumar and his wife. They were chained and produced in the court.

Sohanpuri couldn't bear to see her brother and sister-in-law in chains. She pleaded to the Raja: "Bapuji! no one can avoid the dictates of Destiny. Whatever happened to me is none of their fault. The cause of my misfortune was that *Oodni*. Please have it buried in that pit."

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The Raja and Rani were agreeably surprised to hear Rajkumari's words of wisdom. He took his daughter in his arms and blessed her.

The Rajkumar and his wife were released. The people were all praise for Sohanpari.

— Translated from original Dogri into Hindi by Shri Vishnu Bhardwaj and into English by Shrimati Asha Dhar.

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33
The Clever Cock

Taking an easy stroll, a fox reached a village. There she saw a cock— standing on its legs—meaty and appetising. She wanted to gobble it up right away, but discretion was the better part of valour. She thought to herself: "If I try to reach near the cock, he may run or fly away in a jiffy. Why not try a ruse that without his suspecting anything foul, I finish him."

So, slowly, ever so slowly, the fox came near the cock, and said to him: "I roam about in the jungles. And, sometimes when I hear your sweet crowing, my heart leaps up in joy. I lose myself in an ecstacy. It is indeed my good luck that I happen to meet you today. At dawn your melodious crowing awakens people and they pray. Your crown- like tuft is very attractive". And so on...

Flattered with this praise, the cock started crowing. By dint of old habit, whenever the cock crows, it invariably closes its eyes. The fox noticed it and readied herself to carry out her plot.

The second time when the cock crowed again, with eyes closed, the fox leapt at it, grabbed its neck in her mouth, without chewing on it straightaway, and walked on.

Contented that her mission was successful, the fox trotted through another village, hoping to make a meal of the cock at a shady place near a well.

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The dogs over there saw the fox with her prey in her mouth, barked and followed them.

The cock, his sturdy neck deftly held in the fox's mouth, was still alive. He hadn't completely lost his nerve. Why not try some stratagem to free myself, the cock said to himself?

The cock addressed the fox, "My big sister! why should you get scared and run?" Steady your step. And tell these dogs that you have brought your catch from another village and as such they don't have any claim on it.

Without giving a thought, the fox halted and addressed the dogs: "I have got this cock from another village. You don't have any right to it." While she was saying these words, her mouth opened wide. No sooner was the cock released from the grip over his neck, than he flew up to a tree, where the fox could not follow him.

The dogs and the fox were left wonderstruck. The fox, nonplussed, regretted her mistake, but it was too late to mend the situation. She took a disappointed look at the cock and sighed, "Let that mouth burn which opens untimely!"

And from the safety of the tree, the cock rejoined: "Let those eyes burn which close untimely!"

— Translated from Dogri into Hindi by Shri Virendra 'Vimal', and from Hindi into English by Shrimati Asha Dhar.

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34

Story of Vasuki Naga

"Hey ho! listen to us, folks!" say the shepherds in a sing-song manner in Bhadrawah. The sacred land of Duggar (in Bhadrawah principality) was ruled by the Naga Kings, whose progenitor was Vasuki Naga, associated in song and legend with Kailash Kund. Today it is also called Vas Kund or Kailash Kund — the source of the rivers Tawi, Unj and Neeru in Jammu. The capital of Vasuki Naga clan rulers was Bhadrawah town.

Vasuki Naga had in all 84 children—Kai, Baid, Chorsoo, Kalsoo, Lunsoo, Dansar, Mansar, Chilak, Milok, Songlee, etc. Kai was his eldest son and Baid was the youngest. Kai's mother was Kapoori and Beri Nagin was Baid's mother.

Once Vasuki Naga was afflicted with a horrible skin disease. The *vaids* (physicians) were called to attend upon him. "Maharaj," they said in unison, "if anyone could bring out a stream from the Kailash Kund and you bathe in that water, your disease will be cured."

Knowing this verdict from the *vaids*, Raja Vasuki called a mammoth meeting of ministers, nobles and learned men. The Ashtkul Nagas were also invited. A proclamation was made in the kingdom that whoever first brings out a rivulet from the Kailash Kund up to Vasuki's abode will be made the Raja of Jammu.

On hearing the announcement, the chivalrous folks left in search of the rivulet. Baid was quite shrewd. He left straight for the Kailash Kund. Once there, he was puzzled. There were innumerable Kunds and he did't know which of these was the Kailash Kund. He pondered the situation for a while. After some time the puzzle was unravelled to him. With all his might, he pushed aside huge boulders. Gr...gr....gr....

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the boulders toppled down and exposed Kailash Kund. Himself, he ran for safety for he would have got buried under the boulders. Instantly, water gushed down from the Kund. Baid followed the flow of this water right from the start until it reached the abode of Raja Vasuki. Thus Baid was the first to bring the rivulet right up to his father's home.

Vasuki Naga was very excited. He took a plunge in the rivulet and had a refreshing bath. He was cured of his malady immediately. As he was faithful to his pledge, Baid was awarded Jammu as his prize.

The rivulet he brought from Kailash Kund continues to flow right up to Jammu. It is known as the river Tawi.

Kai had left on the same mission as Baid. He brought back home a container full of water, musing all the way that he would be the first to get the desired water and get the principality of Jammu as the reward.

But, to his shock, he received the news that Baid had achieved his mission first and had secured Jammu as his reward.

Kai became furious. He banged the container, full of water, on the stone. Lo and behold! the water took the form of a rivulet, known now as Chandarbaga river.

Kai was, nevertheless, disappointed. Still he followed the course that Chandarbaga took and thus reached Akhnoor. He captured the town forcibly. Thus while Baid became the Raja of Jammu, Kai became the Raja of Akhnoor.

One day Halan and Talan, the two commanders-in-chief of Mandi, conspired to tie up Baid and throw him in the sea and thereafter grab the principality of Jammu. This plot was revealed to Raja Baid in time. Instead of taking to arms, he started appeasing and worshipping goddess Kalka. His foes disappeared without harming him one bit.

Raja Baid's wife was Nambla and their son was Surgal. In old age, Raja Baid lived in Kadoli Nagrora, which place is still called 'Baba Baid dee Dabri.'

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Baba Baid is the family god of many Rajput clans including the Jamwal Rajput Rajas and Maharajas. These clans still shave the hair of their children at Baba Baid dee Dabri.

At Baba Baid dee Dabri, there is a bigh boulder in the middle of river Chandrabaga. If the faithful pour milk in the flowing river atop this boulder, they are sure to have a *darshan* of the Baba and his beautiful temple, so say the devout.

So sing the shepherds, going from door to door, collecting flour. This they feed to the river creatures. Thus they sing that with Baba's grace the river will not dry even in a severe summer; scorpions and snakes will not bother homes of the people in the rainy season.

— From the Dogri original by Shri Anant Ram Sharma.
Translated into English by Shrimati Asha Dhar.

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35

The Tale of Shud Mahadev

[The locale is the town of Chenani — about 66 miles east of Jammu. About five miles from here is the Gauri Parvat shrine, still held sacred by the people of the district. Every year, on *Ashad Shukla Purnima*, a three-day fair, called *Mela Shudi*, is held here. An old Shiva temple is the centre of the pilgrimage. It is said that right under the Shiva *lingham*, a streamlet - the Devika - appears which flows on to join the Jalhari, another stream. About two miles away is the Gauri Kund. From it the Devika rivulet appears and flows on to Shudi. It pierces through mountains and reaches Udhampur. In the vicinity of Udhampur, the rivulet spreads out at Hariyabal but suddenly disappears. The Devika appears again at Jandrah and goes on towards Purumandal, another holy spot, and then towards the north. Due to the rivulet's disappearance and reappearance, the Devika is also called *Gupt Ganga* (Hidden Ganga).]

The tale harks back to the days of Shiv-Parvati romance. Shiva was a fickle-minded lover who wouldn't get entangled in the shackles of marriage. But Parvati (also called Gauri), on the other hand, wanted a loving and stable married life with Shiva (or Mahadev).

Determined in her resolve, Parvati embarked on a penance to secure the hand of her lover, Lord Shiva, in marriage. Her dedication had the desired effect. Lord Shiva appeared before her and agreed to marry her. That meeting ground is Gauri Parvat now, teeming with the love-lore of the mythological lovers, Shiva and Parvati.

Centuries later, Rishi Kashyapa, chose the same spot to placate Mahadev, through meditation and penance. But, Shudant, the local

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demon, wouldn't let anyone come near to Gauri Parvat. "Go back to where you came from, holy sage !" he admonished Kashyap "This place is mine and nobody dare trespass here", he added.

The Rishi ignored Shudant's warning and continued with his penance. Shudant would't have it. He tried all nuisance tactics to disrupt the Rishi's meditation.

Rishi Kashyapa, peace-loving as ever, sought mediation from the gods. He sent his disciples to Shivalok (heaven) to Lord Shiva, requesting his intervention.

At that time, Shiva was busy with Brahma. He couldn't be approached because of his preoccupation. So the Rishi's disciples thought it expedient to approach Parvati.

Parvati became furious at Shudant's impertinence. "How dare Shudant disrespect the revered sage?" So saying, she decided to go herself with the messengers to settle the dispute between the Rishi and the demon.

Parvati tried her best to advise and even pacify Shudant. He was after all a stubborn demon. He refused to budge an inch. She had no alternative but to wage war with the recalcitrant demon.

Shudant was no ordinary demon. He had extraordinary prowess and he succeeded in defeating Parvati in one single attempt.

The news of Parvati's defeat reached Lord Shiva in Shivalok. He decided to come down to Gauri Parvat to rescue his harassed wife. The situation had taken a serious turn. It was Shiva's beloved that Shudant had dared to subdue. Shiva's fury could be devastating.

When Shudant heard of Lord Shiva's arrival, he lost his nerve. He fell at the feet of the Lord and supplicated. "Mighty Lord! Pardon me for disturbing your peace in Shivalok and troubling you to come down to the earth. I am ashamed of my folly." Shudant begged for mercy also from Parvati and Rishi Kashyapa.

Shiva was so placated with Shudant's change of heart that he asked him whether he wanted anything.

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"Merciful Lord!" Shudant replied humbly, "Relieve me from the wretched existence of a demon."

Shudant's wish was immediately granted. "What else do you want?" Shiva asked him again.

"Maharaj" Shudant said excitedly, for he was overwhelmed with Lord Shiva's kindness, "people around here find it hard to trek to the holy Ganga to wash off their sins. O Gracious Lord! fetch us a stream of the Ganga this side so that the people here are blessed."

Lord Shiva granted this wish also to Shudant. And, instantly a stream of the Ganga started flowing in Gauri Parvat. It is popularly called Devika Maee or Devak.

Since then the people of Chenani and the area around consecrate the ashes of their dead in this holy stream instead of at Hardwar. The fact that demon Shudant had the unexpected darshan of Lord Shiva on *Ashad Shukla Purnima* — and also got release from the earthly bondage — has earned the place the name of Shud Mahadev. The day is celebrated by the local folks with great joy.

— From the Dogri original by Shri Anant Ram Shastri.
Translated into English by Shrimati Asha Dhar.

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36

Ladakhi Folk-Tale of Gyalpo Kesar

Gyalpo Kesar—King Kesar—was a superhuman king of Ling. The story of Kesar runs into volumes of prose and verse. Generally, the story is recited by a professional storyteller, spread over several nights. He narrates it during the long winter nights, the audience seated around a cosy fire sipping chhang (local beer), interspersed with Tibetan salted-buttered tea. He tells the story in prose and recites the verses, wherever they occur. This is the story of Gyalpo Kesar's birth:

One day when Agu Palle Gyalpo was tending his flock of goats and sheep, a white bird came from a white hill. And, a black bird came from a black mountain. They fought with each other right from dawn until dusk. The black bird appeared to be winning in the morning. At noon they were equal, but in the evening the white bird won, subduing the black bird completely.

The following day, a white yak come from a white hill and a black yak from a black hill. They also fought like the white and black birds. The black yak had the upper hand in the morning. They were equal at noon. The white yak subdued the black yak in the evening.

Agu Palle believed that the black bird and the black yak were the incarnations of the Devil. He decided to kill the black yak with his sling, and dedicate the trophy to his protective deities.

While he was planning to destroy the black yak, the animal got miraculously transformed into Devil Churau-Lugu and the white yak was transformed into his protective deity, Wang-Po Gyab-Zhin, in the form of a child, about three feet tall. Wang-Po promised all his treasures and half of his Kingdom to Agu Palle if he killed devil Churu-

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Lugu. But Agu Palle Galpo refused the offer. Instead, he asked Wang-Po to send one of his sons to rule over the kingdom of Ling as they had no ruler. Wang-Po Gyab-Zhin went back to heaven and promised to convey his decision to Agu Palle within a week's time.

On reaching heaven, Wang-Po felt very sad. He wrapped himself up in a blanket, went to sleep and would take no food or drink. Many days passed thus. One day his eldest son, Ton-Dan, brought victuals for his father. But Wang-Po would not eat. Ton-Dan wanted to know the reason why his father abstained from food and drink. Wang-Po said: "My son, I had promised Agu Palle that I would send one of my sons to rule Ling, the Land of Man". He added: "Would you go to Ling as a ruler?"

"No, my father!" Ton-Dan refused flatly, "it is not possible for a celestial being to go to the human world as a ruler. It would be impossible for me to eat or drink or exist as a human being."

Wang-Po's second son, Ton-Yod, also refused to go to the land of Ling, offering the same excuse as Ton-Dan did.

So Wang-Po continued his protest fast. Due to worry and starvation, he got emaciated and was nearing death. But he wanted to try his third and the youngest son, as the last resort. So the youngest son, Ton Dub, was summoned by his father. "Would you go to Ling as the ruler of human beings?" he asked.

"My royal father," Ton-Dub said, "send me anywhere you like, even to a place where I might die of starvation or get killed by hostile inhabitants. I must have your good wishes and blessings."

On hearing this, King Wan-Po was very pleased and relieved. He broke his fast and came out of his bed.

Ton-Dub, the youngest son, was, however, very much loved by his father, Wang-Po. He did not want to part with him and send him to Ling.

After that, King Wang-Po summoned all his three sons together. He said to them, "You are going to have three contests. The one who wins the contest will remain here (in heaven) and the one who loses shall go to Ling." The clauses for the contest were: pick up a bag full of arrow shaft and a bag full of arrow heads. When riding downhill,

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scatter the arrow-heads and, while galloping uphill, pick and put the arrow-heads into the shafts. The second test was to collect mustard seeds off the sandy floor. The third was a hunting contest.

Ton-Dub, the youngest son, won all the three contests.

Meanwhile, Agu Palle Gyalpo, the shepherd, had become engrossed in tending his flock—of sheep, goats and yak — and had forgotten about King Wang-Po's promise. In order to remember the day when he would receive Wang-Po's message, he had devised a rustic method. He tied a stone to the ear of the goat who would be milked on the seventh day.

When, on the seventh day, Agu Palle's wife was milking the goat, the stone hit against the animal's cheek. She shied and split the milk. Agu Palle, who was standing nearby, remembered the promise Wang-Po had made to send one of his sons to rule Ling.

Agu Palle explored all possible regions, the heaven above and *Patal*- the land of *Nagas* below— to find a steed who would carry him to the country of King Wang-Po, to make him live up to his promise. But he failed in his quest, for nobody agreed to sell a horse to him. After his futile effort in *Patal*, he went to Ama Skyab-Doon, his rich neighbour. The two exchanged customary salutations first; then Agu Palle presented *'Khatak'* kerchief to Ama Skyab-Doon. Later he requested her to sell a steed to him as he had to go to the country of King Wang-Po Gyab-Zhin. Ama Skyab-Doon agreed to sell a fine horse to him only if he paid four and half rupees for each hair of the horse.

Agu Palle said: "I have shepherded goats and sheep, yak and oxen all my life in my home at Ling. And, due to good tending, all the animals have multiplied a hundredfold. I am prepared to barter all the livestock and all my silver for the horse." Ama Skyab-Doon agreed and gave him a full-blooded steed.

Agu Palle mounted it, girded his broken sword and rode to the country of the gods. He came across Ton-Yod, Ton-Dan and Ton-Dub's sister, who were enjoying sunshine on a roof-top.

"Good lady!" Agu Palle enquired from Ton-Dub's sister "whereabouts is the palace of King Wang-Po?"

"Find it yourself" she replied curtly.

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Agu Palle felt insulted at this retort of hers. "Do you know who I am?" he told her indignantly. "I am Agu Palle Galpo. My this sword cuts even the stones asunder." He threatened her." If you do not show me the King's palace, I will tear you into two pieces. One half I will send up to heaven and the other half throw into the firmament below." The girl got scared out of her wits and ran to her father king Wang-Po Gyab-Zhin.

"Father, father, save me" she sobbed, "some stranger out there is threatening to kill me."

The King at once understood who the intruder-rider could be.

Agu Palle was summoned to present himself to the King.

Strangely enough, the two exchanged customary salutations and shook hands. Agu Palle reminded the King of his promise which he had failed to keep. After some altercation, the King agreed to send Ton-Dub to Ling after seven days.

"My son!" Wang-Po told Ton-Dub "I ask you to go to Ling and establish your rule there."

With head bent low in obedience Ton-Dub said to his father; "As you say, revered father!" and continued, " I'll go to Ling but I wish to take a look at that land first before I take over as King Kesar of Ling."

By heavenly occult power, Ton-Dub transformed himself into a beautiful bird, and alighted on the housetop of Agu Thai-go Hung of Ling.

When Agu Thai-go espied the beautiful bird, he asked his wife: "Wife! fetch me my bow and arrow. I shall shoot the bird and make soup out of it."

The bird overheard Agu Thai-go's wicked intention. He flew away immediately and left a heap of dung on Agu's house-top.

Therefrom, the bird flew to Agu Palle's house and alighted on his roof. Agu Palle thought the perching of a beautiful bird on his house as a good omen. He fed the bird with delicious grain and other food. He even lit ceremonial incense to greet it. The inhabitants of Ling also received the bird hospitably and fed him the choicest food.

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When Ton-Dub, the 'bird', arrived back home, he told his father that all the inhabitants of Ling were kind-hearted and hospitable except Agu Thai-go Hung.

Strangely enough, the lives of the three sons of King Wang-Po Gyab-Zhin were bound to a cup of milk. The King asked his daughter to pour milk out of Ton-Dub's cup. Ton-Dub died the same moment.

At that very time, a furious hailstorm enveloped the whole country of Ling. Agu Palle and his wife Gog-Zhang Lhamo saw a child in the middle of fire. Gog-Zhang cried helplessly: "Take the child out of the fire!" But the child answered: "This fire is just to warm my hands. The butter serves to annoint me. The four chains are the signs that I will subdue the four continents. I will throw the wicked Shraman into the blazing fire. And I will jump out of the fire like a lion."

Even before Kesar was born to Gog-Zhang Lhamo, she was smitten with leprosy. One day Kesar said to her: "Mother! you should not go to another house for your toilet. Ask some woman to the house to help you. For while I am away to collect fuel, thieves might burgle the house in your absence."

But Gog-Zhang did not heed Kesar's advice and went to another house for a wash and hair-do. In the meantime, Kesar came back home and hid everything. He put some sand and barley grains in a clay pot for parching. This done, he went back to the forest to fetch fuel. When he came back he blamed his mother for negligence, for all their belongings had disappeared. The only thing left was the claypot for roasting barley for Tsampe.

Kesar said to his mother, "I am very hungry. Give me some food." Gog-Zhang Lhamo put the claypot containing sand and grain of barley on fire for roasting. In order to stir the contents she put her hand into the pot. Kesar seized her hand while it was in the pot which was full of red hot sand and barley. He would not allow her to extricate it unless she revealed to him who his father was. "I don't really know", she moaned in pain.

Kesar let his mother's hand free. It was terribly scalded. Then he took his mother's hand in his own hands and caressed and kissed it. Miraculously, as it were, the ghastly burns and blisters got healed at once. Gog-Zhang Lhamo's body was free from leprosy altogether.

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Short Stories

Introduction

These simple and unadorned tales deal with the people of Kashmir — their loves, their hates, their deep-set superstitions, their struggles with wild animals and untamed nature in some of her fiercest moods. Great mountains can be not only majestic but they can be most terrifying to those who fall a prey to wild storms while far away from any abode of man. Only those who have spent a night alone in remote forests, where wild beasts roam, can understand the pathetic alarm of the small Kashmiri lad lost in the woods ("The Lost Guide").

The stories, "To the Eden", and "Love in the Valley", afford a pictorial survey of the Vale, which has been called "Paradise of the Indies". The ones entitled "Nambardar's Bull", "Return of the Native" and "Vendetta", interestingly portray the mountaineers, their pristine emotions and outlandish ways. The discerning reader will realise that the stories are based on personal observations of the author who had rambled across the length and breadth of the Valley.

The themes covered are diverse. For the Kashmiris, the stories, "Her Man Gula", "Water-thief" and "The Confession", have a *deja vu* quality, the nitty-gritty of down-to-earth life in bygone-days when organised violence was unknown. The same is the case with "Told by Rahti" and "The Ear-ring". The Bear and Leopard stories cater to the interests of all children, young and old.

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The Lost Guide

"Don't you see," said Aziza to one of the party of mountain labourers, going to work to carry loads of felled timber, "I am returning home to Ningli Nulla along with the Seth"—beckoning the visitor with a graceful movement of his hand—"I am his guide. I've to show him Ningli Nulla and then I've to accompany him back to his Gulmarg hut."

"What will the Seth Sahib pay you?" asked the headman.

"Two rupees!" exclaimed Aziza.

The transparent faces of the sturdy labourers spoke their astonishment that a visitor was paying such a large amount of money to the boy for accompanying him for a few miles. The headman patted Aziza, who looked proud and walked on, crossing the party, along the narrow mountain path.

Aziza was a boy of sixteen, tall for his age and well-built. Tanned and dirty as he was, his face was radiant and his eyes gleamed with the light of forest-bred boyhood. Walking swiftly, he conducted the visitor along short cuts to save time and distance. Aziza tightened his baggy trousers to put off mud and slush that was raised by his heedless, bare feet. His shirt had on it the patches of poverty. Yet his waistcoat had fine red and blue Kashmiri embroidery worked on its fringes. His skull cap had somewhat inferior work. Conscious of his superior cap, he deposited it on his head at a fashionable Gurkha angle. It was this something of charming dauntlessness in Aziza that made the visitor to overpay him.

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The visitor was a stray professor who had managed to have a brief holiday at Gulmarg. Impelled by his trekking enthusiasm, he had already hiked to many glens and mountain lakes beyond Gulmarg. To all these beautiful places, the professor went on ponies. Disgusting, mule-headed ponies, they all were. So he had decided to have a real hike to Ningli Nulla. None of his party was prepared to foot the long arduous distance. The professor, not to be daunted, went alone.

The road to Ningli Nulla lay straight before the professor but, delayed by the Gymkhana sports, he found it was already 4.30 p.m. If he must go to Ningli Nulla and reach Gulmarg back during the day, he must take a guide and shorten the distance through short cuts. He found Aziza when he had well nigh despaired of finding one. From his broken Urdu, he came to know that he lived near Ningli Nulla. Nothing would be better. Therefore he said to the guide, "Name your price to take me to Ningli Nulla and escort me back to Gulmarg." Aziza fixed it at the impossible "two rupees" and was surprised to find that the Seth accepted it. To Aziza all visitors were Seths!

Their path narrowed up towards the ascent. The professor mentally revised his Shakespeare's *Arden* and Wordsworth's mountain poems. The boy — yea, the proud guide, for, this was the first time for Aziza to act as a guide — climbed ahead with all the grace and skill of a mountain goat. He thought of his father and how happy he would be to have the two rupees: Aziza's four days' wages and all that big sum for simply walking with a Seth. The path grew slippery. Aziza helped the professor up narrow defiles. Now they had to go down a deep descent. It appeared impossible to the professor, but did not daunt him much. Careful steps, where a mere slip would throw him down into a deep precipice, found him at last at the base of the hillside. The noise of the babbling Ningli Nulla could be heard in the distance. A herd of forest monkeys, big, black and bulky, squeaked at their approach, grimaced suspiciously at them and then jumped away.

The mountain glen facing them, was disfigured owing to the felling of the trees there. The improvised shelters of the wood-sawyers and labourers dotted the glen. Aziza reached the shelter of his father. Running up to his father, he shouted to him, "Look, Amira, here is the Seth, I'll take him to the Nulla ahead and then back to Gulmarg. He will pay me two rupees!" Two rupees for only this much! The 'Seth', trying to look one, could read that in Amira's incredulous eyes. But a shade crossed Amira's furrowed countenance, as he said to Aziza, "The

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bread is getting ready, Aziza. Make haste. Don't stay at the Nulla for long. The sun will set soon. You must come back by daylight." Aziza hurried away and led the visitor to the nearby Nulla.

Ningli Nulla, a beautiful mountain stream dashed down amidst towering, steep precipices, parts of which were covered with Deodars and conifers. The mountain background subtly increased the awe-inspiring charm of the place. The visitor was lost in contemplation of the foamy, ice-cold water, in which he cooled his bared feet, when Aziza broke in unceremoniously, "Make haste, Seth. You know, I've to return to this place after I leave you at Gulmarg." This curt reminder did not very much discomfit the professor. He lit up a cigarette and threw one at Aziza, who did not smoke it but kept it, for these were Ramzan fast days. Thanks to the cigarette, Aziza silently waited on while the professor, after having his refreshments, sat calm and sedate. But soon after, he shook himself and prepared to go.

Aziza met his father on the return. His father said to him, "Shall I go with the Seth? It is getting late now and you may feel afraid on your return." Aziza, acting the guide for the first time, would have none of it.

"Father, you prepare the meal, while I come back", he replied.

"Would you like to taste our poor bread, Seth?" said Amira to the professor.

"Yes, why not?"

He took it and searched a coin in his pocket to pay Amira. Amira, understanding what he was about, said, "Seth Sahib, I give this to you as our guest. I don't sell it." That was that. So the professor and Aziza sped on their return journey. Walking quickly and leading the way, the professor munched the baked maize bread. It tasted sweeter than the best cake. In the thick forest it was somewhat darkening now and Aziza said, impatiently, to the professor, "Seth Sahib, the time for *Iftihar* (evening meal during *Ramzan* fasts) is coming." Yes, it was, the professor thought, as he still further quickened his steps. The sun, sinking behind the Pir Panchal range, was casting a golden aroma of light on the forest-clad copses of the nearby mountain. Clouds jealously shut away the sun and the golden hue scattered over the mountain side disappeared as at the devil's touch. It was almost dark now.

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The evening star shone bright up above the heaving mountain line.

At Darin, a mountain hamlet situated in a wide, forest meadow, the boys in a *Bahak* (Gujar temporary mud and timber shelter) recognised Aziza and came running towards him. To them Aziza narrated his wonder tale of 'two rupees'. A Gujar dog, restlessly kennelled, barked at them. Aziza almost ran now, telling the professor, "Seth Sahib, leave me here. I must return now, for it is getting late. You can guide yourself from here to your hut, which is only a mile ahead. There are no more short cuts now and this road goes direct onwards."

"Yes, yes, I quite remember the road. You can go now." And, offering him a piece of Amira's bread, which he had not eaten completely, the professor added, "Have this. You must be feeling hungry."

Quite nonchalantly, Aziza replied, "Seth Sahib, you look a Hindu and yet you ate our bread. You seem to have no religion. I can't eat that left piece, especially during *Ramzan*."

Appreciating that, the professor took out his purse to pay off Aziza but he found that he had a fiver as the smallest currency note on him and he had very little change. A professor, inadequately remunerated, he thought, he was already extravagant in paying the two rupees where eight annas should have done the thing. He could ill-afford to pay him a fiver. He told Aziza what the matter was and Aziza had willy nilly to come up to Gulmarg where a ponywalla changed the professor's fiver and he paid off his guide with a *Bakhsheesh* added on to it. With that in his hand, Aziza *salaamed* him and turned back to go to his father's shelter in Ningli Nulla.

The sun relentlessly hid itself behind darkening, silver-lined clouds. Twilight was fast fading into darkness, in the forest, as Aziza wended his breathless way along the road which would first take him to Darin, wherefrom he would take to short cuts. When he reached Darin, his friends came out again to greet him, saying "Aziza, break your *Roza* here and rest at ours for the night."

"No, no, my father must be waiting for me. I'll take the short cut up the mountainside and in half an hour I shall reach my shelter."

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The disappointed boys, on hearing this, went back to their *Bahak* and Aziza, preoccupied with his own thoughts, did not even look back at them. For the first time, enveloped in the overwhelming darkness, Aziza felt ill at ease. Never before had he been alone like this in a jungle. Oh, never mind, boy, he heartened himself. By the faint starlight, as much of it as pierced the thick foliage of firs, spruces and pines, he discerned his short-cut path. At a twist of it he felt uncertain for a moment. His bare feet, though bruised all over by now, did not seem to recognise the path that he took. But he must be right in such a small matter, he reassured himself.

As he climbed up, his feet increasingly told him that he had taken the wrong path, which perhaps was only a goat track. No, he must go on, for this would take him to the short cut. But what was that? A crashing sound, followed by a thud and then, absolute silence, broken at intervals by the monotonous humming of the chirping beetles. Was it a monkey or was it — the fear harrowingly crossed him — a bear or a leopard? His heart pounded fast. He walked like a man in sleep. Dark earth appeared to be sinking before his swimming eyes. He had acted the guide for the first time and he was himself lost now. Oh! he was indeed the lost guide. Another thud, immediately followed by the unmistakable snorts and growls of a bear. Not knowing what he was doing, Aziza *instinctively* climbed a tall fir with the alacrity of a forest monkey. Scrambling up the fir he almost reached the top, which swung to and fro. He clung on to it like a leech. Resting his burning head against a branch of the fir, he sank into unconsciousness for some time. Coming to, he groped about in the darkness. The stars above mercilessly looked down at him and revealed to him the heaving conical breasts of the tops of surrounding firs and pines. Strangely enough, their faint outlines against the starry heaven reminded him of Fati, the shepherd girl, whose meek glances spoke stories of love to Aziza even as he recalled them to his feverish mind. His father had found them together when she was tending her flock near Khellanmarg. He had understood....The fond reverie was broken by a horrifying growl of the bear, who was nearing his tree.

Aziza could even hear the close sniffing of the bear. The bear was picking his trail, he understood that all right. In his usual clumsy way, the bear gave the fir on whose top Aziza precariously dangled, a rude knock. The bear's weight and force shook the fir and shook the nerves of poor Aziza. His heart sank to his bare feet. But his feet were fast clutching the foothold. His hands were firm round the tree like the

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hunter's steel glove round the neck of his prey. His lips were sealed with a grim determination to stand the ordeal, come what may.

The jolting of the fir made it horribly clear that the bear was scrambling up the fir. Soon he discerned the woolly outline of the damned beast as it climbed up step by step, breaking branches and uttering fierce growls. Aziza went as far up as he could go. The bear reached up the fir to a distance of about two yards below Aziza. The fir shook right and left. To throw Aziza down, the clever bear shook the fir to and fro, itself climbing down to a safer perch. Aziza clung to the fir top for his very life. He was only conscious of the fact that he must hold on and that he did. The bear again gave the fir a shaking. It then came down and fell down on the turf with a thud. Aziza took some time to realise that he was out of danger. Still he dared not move for a long time.

After some time, the lost guide cautiously groped down the fir to about its middle where he could stride over the interwoven branches and rest his splitting head against a branch. Then he knew how terribly exhausted and nerve-shattered he was. Pangs of hunger made his misery more acute. He must rest like that for, he could not tell, how long a time. After all that he again heard the familiar humming of the beetles. An owl ominously hooted somewhere. Was Amira all right, thought Aziza? While he clutched a branch tight, merciful sleep overcame him.

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To The Eden

The train steamed into the Rawalpindi station. The early morning crisp air braced Mr. Edward Nichols and Miss Dorothy Johnson as they alighted from a second class compartment of the Frontier Mail. Porters besieged them, pushing and jostling one another, "Sahib, see my number," "Sahib, coolie wanted," "Sahib, we two will carry luggage," and so on. Nichols selected two out of them, cheerful healthy Jats, gave one a pat on the shoulder, saying, "Hullo! you number 46, take our luggage to bus stand, in front of car number 3329. Get that? 3329. Ask the driver to get ready."

"Yes, Sahib. Thank you, Sahib!"

The 'Sahib' laughed at the broken English of the porter and threw him a nickel as an advance *bakhsheesh*.

"Let me have it, dear," Edward Nichols said to his fiancee, as he carried her attache case.

"You're a dear, Edward." She took his arm, feeling proud of walking by him—this most beautiful and talented specimen of the British race—as they hastened towards the Refreshment Room.

Tea over, Edward Nichols hurried Miss Johnson out, saying, "The car must be waiting, Dorothy. We must reach Srinagar by four or four-thirty. The Guide Books call Srinagar 'the Venice of the East.' Oh! darling, we must see this Venice. I've been to the real Venice once which, I didn't like at all. But we'll still go there some day."

"Yes, Edward, we'll", she replied, as if lost in a day nap. Why did she feel queer? Why did that dark fear haunt her? The mysterious fear,

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surreptitiously tugging at her heart had allowed her no sleep for the night in the comfortable compartment. She had smoked endless cigarettes. She had heard him speak in his sleep, "Kashmir, lovely valley. The writer calls it 'the Eden of the East'. To the Eden...." She too loved to go there and escape the depressing heat of the Punjab. There, sure enough, was the car, with the luggage neatly mounted up.

The Pathan driver greeted them, "Sahib *Salaam!* Mem Sahib *Salaam!* A happy day! We start in a minute." He bustled about, ordering his assistant. The car agents stood by, with their books, expertly taking in the Sahib at a glance and deciding that any amount could be extorted from him, for he was apparently engrossed in his 'Mem Sahib' and anxious to go to the Happy Valley. They made capital out of that, "Sahib! car seats, seventy-five rupees. Reservation fee, fifteen rupees. Coolie charges, road toll—."

"Now shut up, give me that total plus ten rupees *bakhsheesh* and off you go, you *Babus*," authoritatively interrupted the Briton.

The overpaid porters and the agents *salaamed* the Sahibs as the luxurious Ford manoeuvred its way out of the crowded bus stand.

As an English boy, living in the West End, London, Edward Nichols had heard colourful descriptions of India from his uncle, who was retired from service in Bombay as a military official. Nichols devoured his stories. He liked especially to hear his uncle's panther-shooting escapades in Kashmir. He too learnt shooting in the Military School which he joined for a time after his public school career. He then swerved to I.C.S. examination and passed it with flying colours. His parents and his uncle were happy. His uncle patted him at the railway station, with, "Boy, keep up your family's prestige in India."

Here, in India, the sun-lit and sun-scorched land of strange contrasts, he was posted as Deputy Commissioner in Ludhiana. Not yet steeped in the imperialist, blue-blooded ways, he lived on easy terms with his subordinates and grew popular. His English friends, particularly Colonel Johnson, did not like his democratic ways but the Colonel did not dare to point it out to him and rationalised to his wife, "See, Mary, this Nichols is like a Yankee guy. What's the matter with him, God alone knows? He is spoiling these Indians with his familiar

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manners. But"— more confidently, edging towards her rocking chair— "he is really coming nearer our Dorothy. That's what matters."

She lit up with pride on the immense good fortune of her daughter in marrying a young I.C.S. officer and cooed obediently, "That's what matters, indeed. Now here comes Dorothy."

Soon after, the engagement of Miss Dorothy Johnson with Mr. Edward Nichols featured in the big society papers of India in headlines. The female members of the Civil Club, Ludhiana, stared at the printed photograph in utter amazement, jealous of the triumph of the Colonel's daughter.

But she was not elated. She took it as natural, for from the first day they met at the Club, Edward Nichols had taken an interest in her. Her blonde beauty, her tall figure and dignified carriage, her deep blue eyes, ever so dreamy and exotic and her intelligence, had captured him. She admired him for his manly bearing, his sporting spirit, his learning and his devotion to her. She loved him the first moment she saw him, young, cheerful fresh and robust.

And, now they were *en route* to the Happy Valley.

"Dorothy, I like this Guide Book to Kashmir. It's the latest, you know. Its title is excellent : 'Eden of the East.' How I've always longed to see this Earthly Eden! And, with you! to be married there..."

He affectionately fingered the book while she nestled closer to him. Her sweet presence intoxicated him. He drew her nearer still. He began again, opening a page, "Now, look here, there are two churches in Srinagar. Where shall we be married?"

Miss Johnson took the book from him and skimmed over the page. A sigh involuntarily escaped her, as she did so. A faint maidenly blush crossed her. Nichols saw it and kissed her. She fixed upon Protestant Church, picturing the wished-for scenes of the wedding — the big cake, the grand party, the crowded clubs and glamorous balls, honeymoon in Gulmarg, Pahalgam, Sonamarg and even higher up, towards the glaciers. The vision faded into the distant look of Murree. The distant view of the green woods refreshed them. She said, "Look there! Murree is approaching. What lovely pines!"

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"Marvellous, my love!" He kissed her, over and over again, passionately, and yet he reflected, "Will this last, darling? This is a dream, a painted dream. After all we'll see the Eden of the East — I like the phrase — and there we'll have our honeymoon. A grand time, we must have. Now, I've fixed the place, from this Guide as to where we halt at Srinagar. Nagin Bagh," and to the Pathan, occupied with the wheel, whose face they saw in the central mirror, "do I pronounce it right, NAGIN BAGH? Yes? O.K. That is the beauty spot with bathing boats. The first thing I'd do there, darling, is have a cool dip while you'll manage things."

"No, no, dear, no diving. The lake must be full of weeds. And we'll have other things to do."

"Darling, do you think, I can resist the temptation when we reach Nagin Bagh?" Nichols protested, lighting a cigarette.

The car kissed the zigzag mountain road of Murree. Quite an English town, they agreed. "Lovely!" and "Marvellous!" escaped their lips as the car raced about Sunny Bank, the best upland spot of Murree. Edward Nichols threw a cigarette at the Pathan and said, "Driver, slow down. Let's enjoy the scenery of the town."

The road sloped down and, after many flitting mile-boards, it crossed over to the Kashmir boundary.

They walked over Kohala Bridge where the foamy blue water gurgled deep down under the dizzying suspension bridge.

"Lovely!" they declared.

Jhelum Valley Road running in beautiful curves about the mountains afforded them beautiful scenes of the roaring Jhelum, mountain hamlets, awesome precipices and slippery ravines.

"I feel some fear," said Dorothy, half to herself and half to Edward. "I don't know why."

"Why, dear? Have this." They drank from a bottle of wine and ate some biscuits. "My love, don't be afraid of the road and its curves. The driver is an expert."

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Domel Toll Bar! Waiting, waiting, it made Edward Nichols fidgety. The customs official marked his impatient look and had the registers expedited. The toll bar lifted. Thank God!

The Valley of Kashmir opened out before them in shy parts. Snow-capped peaks, green maize fields, mountaineer-women raced by. Glimpses, yes, life is a show, thought Nichols. He must remind the Pathan.

"Driver, remember, don't take much time at the bus stand. Take us straight to Nagin Bagh."

"Yes, *Huzoor*."

That made them laugh and kiss each other.

"These hopeless Indians don't know there ought not to be a room of this number in a hotel," raved Miss Dorothy Johnson as she was conducted to Room No. 13 of King's Lodge, Nagin Bagh. The Assistant Manager, a Kashmiri, who had already sent her luggage to this room, did not know what to make out of her.

"Madam, no other room is vacant," he made polite reply. "You and Sahib will be allotted a house-boat tomorrow afternoon."

That was some satisfaction. But why did they not first tell her that Room No.13 alone was unoccupied? Unlucky number; ominous! She must tell Edward. She must run to him. He had already hurried to the bathing house-boat. She liked the room all the same. The small window commanded a gorgeous scene: the fort-clad hill with almond orchards nestling round its base, just across the smooth arm of the Dal Lake, the banks lined with house-boats and *Shikaras*, and flanked with willows and poplars. True, it was an Eden she was in. And there, sure enough, were the bathing boats and the yachts moored in the centre of the lake. She saw the sprightly form of Edward Nichols moving about the open deck. She must be with him, she decided.

"How can I go to Sahib over there?" she said to the assistant manager, without looking back to where he stood, at a respectable distance from her.

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"Mem Sahib, our *Shikara* will paddle you there, madam."

"Mem" and "Madam" all rolled in one amused her. She said, "Get the *Shikara* ready?" The assistant manager hastened down with the errand.

Dorothy Johnson, still lost in gazing at the bathing boat, gave a hasty cosmetic touch to her face and she actually ran down the stairs. Why this hustle? She did not know.

The *Shikara* spring seat softly caressed her. Oh! it was delightful. For the first time, she rode this gondola of the East. The boatman with the heart-shaped car was drunk with the *hookah* that was yet smoking off.

"Hurry up!" she shouted at him in her accented Urdu, as she looked into the water and saw the forest of weeds, intensely blue and treacherously beautiful.

"*Achcha*, Mem Sahib."

She jumped up the small gangway, forgetting to give a *bakhsheesh* to the boatman. No, but he would wait for her. A loud splash. Her heart sank at the crashing noise. From the deck she saw ripples opening out in circles a few feet away from the boat. Sure, Edward had dived. But, he wasn't to be seen for a few agonized moments. Thank God! his head popped out. He smiled at her, waving water off from his eyes and hair with his hand and blowing a kiss at her.

"Dorothy! Darling!" came up from the disturbed water.

The bathing boat assistant helped Edward Nichols up the gang-board, that touched the rippled surface of the pleasantly cool water of the lake. He ran up to the deck to where, Dorothy, his Dorothy, sat in an arm-chair. He kissed her a wet kiss.

"How you gave me a fright!" she moaned, between a shade of a smile. Voluptuously, she wondered at his athletic form. The dive had sent blood rushing all over his beautiful, red body. His muscles shone. His face wore a halo like a Greek statue'. What hopes and fears played with her in that rapturous moment! But a memory struck her. Room

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No. 13; she didn't tell him about the hotel Manager's impertinence. She would. But she must listen, for he was bustling.

"My love! I like this diving. I always did. Just one more dip and then we've tea here in the boat restaurant."

"Oh! dear." Before she knew what he meant, he ran up the small airy staircase to the high diving-boat and dived headlong.

Frightened like a mouse, she started up from the chair and saw his powerful body impetuously entering into the yielding, splashing water. Foam and ripples. Ripples, ripples, nothing but ripples. Where was he?

"Where is the Sahib?" went the cry. Boat assistants plunged in the water. So did a few Europeans from a nearby sailing boat.

Was it all a dream, a hideous dream? Dorothy Johnson sank down in a swoon as she heard, "Sahib is drowned."

The calm weedy lake was disturbed at many points by boatmen's long punts and by divers, salvaging what was left of Edward Nichols and his dreams.

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Love in the Valley

The Boulevards, bordering the world-famous Gagribal and Dal lakes of Kashmir, are a perpetual source of delight to the wondering visitor, who stands amazed at the majestic sight of the lakes, reflecting in their calm waters the surrounding mountains and the willow trees, plentifully growing on the well-known 'Floating Lands'. The house-boats form the impressive background to this lovely scene. Almost every visitor to the Golden Valley hires a house-boat here. A trip to Kashmir is thought to be hollow if part of the holiday is not spent in a house-boat.

Sergeant Mackenzie, while talking about the beauty of the lake scenery with his wife, seated at his left in the taxi car, asked the driver to drive slowly on the Boulevard. He kept an observant eye on the house-boats, looking for the sign or placard 'To Let' on any one of them. Seeing a fine looking house-boat, bearing the lovely name 'Marmion,' he asked the driver to stop the car on one side of the Boulevard. He helped his wife out of the car. "What a lovely sight!" she exclaimed, "when one has to die, one should die here." The Sergeant asked her to put off pessimistic observations.

They hailed the owner of the house-boat, who turned out to be a Muslim lady. Getting in her *Shikara*, they went into her boat. The Sergeant found fault with the furniture and the bath arrangements. But his wife, Clara, decided that the boat would do. He gave in to her choice, because the doctor had directed him not to oppose her wishes, on account of the weakness of her heart which had reduced her to a state of invalidism.

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The Sergeant's wife fell badly ill, only after a week's stay in the Marmion. Rahti, the proprietress of the Marmion, acted the nurse, and her daughter, Zooni, was the chief attendant. Clara Mackenzie liked Rahti very much. She taught her many more words of English than she knew already. Zooni, aged seventeen, was in the full bloom of her youth. She looked as fresh as any freshly-blown lotus of the Dal Lake. Her name, Zooni, meaning the moon in Kashmiri, became her so well. Clara admired her Jewish features. She would ask Rahti not to allow Zooni to sit in the sun too much, lest the sun should spoil her fair complexion.

Sergeant Mackenzie, one day, sitting by the bed of his wife—now pronounced by the Doctor as a serious case—said to her, just to divert her, "Do you still teach Rahti Basic English?"

"Oh yes, I do," was the hearty reply of the weak patient. Her face lighted up with a proud gleam in her blue eyes. "I make her remember the words and I punish her if—"

"Why should we not coach her only daughter, who attends upon you so devotedly?" was the husband's suggestion.

"What an idea! That is splendid, indeed," she said feebly. "But who would coach her? In my present state of health, I can hardly coach her mother. Besides Zooni has little backing in English. Would you?"

"Oh no, not I, for all the world. I think I would engage our steward's elder brother, who is an experienced teacher in a local school—one of the Church Mission schools that we visited last month."

Three months passed. Lovely Kashmir summer was succeeded by autumn. The leaves of the Chinar trees started changing colour. Clara lingered towards her death. The Sergeant lavished all the money he could to effect her restoration. But soon, too soon, the cruel hand of death stole his only companion from the world.

The Sergeant was too downcast to attend duty at the expiry of his leave. Not knowing what to do, he whiled away his time, fishing in the Dal lake, or taking long walks by himself on the Boulevards and 'tap-listening' to the radio in the evenings, or he would ask Rahti and Zooni

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to sing folk-songs of Kashmir in chorus.

Having extended his leave, he hired the Marmion for a further period of four months, but only after a fortnight he changed his mind. He decided to spend a month at Sonamarg—then newly popularised hill-station of Kashmir. There, surrounded by snow-capped mountains, sloping back from the green meadows, resplendent with wild flowers, he felt better in spirits, and was so much elated as to reply a letter of Mahmood, who had informed him about the progress of Zooni in her study of Basic English. Rahti sent her *salaams* to him.

Indeed, he thought, this pair—Zooni and Rahti—was unusual. They were not at all low, mean and grabbing like the many boatmen he had met before, on his former trips to the Valley; they had upset his wife on many occasions. Thank God, before her death, she contacted this pair.

The Sergeant came down to Srinagar to his boat. His arrival was a happy surprise to Rahti, her daughter and the servants. Zooni actually came out running, saying, "Good afternoon, Sergeant," in English. The Sergeant returned her greetings, pleased with her accent. "How are you going on in English?" he asked her.

"I had finished the Basic course when I wrote to you, sir. I now study Standard English and read books of many English writers." "Isn't that fine, sir?" she continued, showing him some of her books, "I wish your kind wife had lived now. How happy she would have been, sir!"

The freedom of her speech delighted the Sergeant and he amply rewarded her tutor the following day for his teaching success. At the same time, Zooni's intelligence and precociousness amazed him. Her education had brought a pleasing change in her. She wore the Punjabi *salwar* now : the new dress became her charmingly pretty.

She accompanied the Sergeant on a hike to a nearby village up on the mountain. The Shikari and the attendants, who went along, were surprised at her familiarity with the Sergeant. There, sitting in a forest nook with him, she wept bitterly at his mention of his deceased wife. The Sergeant, himself disconsolate to madness, was deeply touched by her sincere sorrow for the loss of his loved wife.

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The Sergeant came closer and closer—unconsciously for the most part—towards Zooni. As his stipulated period of stay in the Marmion was approaching the end, he ruminated more about her—her conversational charm, her sparkling intelligence, her beauty, and her regard for him and his late wife. She....would he marry her? That was the question. Colour bar? Oh! damn that idle notion. She was fair, very. She was—he had to admit to himself—dear to him, much more so than any of the English and other women he met at the Club and elsewhere.

His proposal of marriage did not come as a surprise to Zooni. She, the bashful Orient, took it as a natural course. Rahti also agreed, much against the wishes of her relatives who said to her that this sort of union was unprecedented.

The Christmas Day found the Marmion afloat, beside the Boulevard, with the Sergeant lunching with Mrs. Zooni Mackenzie, discussing the details of their journey to his HQ.

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40
Nambardar's Bull

They slept on the narrow grass bed, perched over the high loft, partly balanced on a willow and partly propped on two poles. The loaded rifle, covered with grass, served as their pillow and a heavy mountaineer's blanket, tucked in well under the feet, mantled them warm. The loft rocked like a hammock as she turned restlessly in the warm bed. The delightfully cool summer night of the hills impelled them to seek each other's warmth. They had met after months and so they conversed in a reminiscent mood.

"Jani, I love you more than I loved my wife," murmured Akbar Khan.

"Yes, you always say so," she piped in mockingly," when you want me like the beast that you are-"

Fierce kisses shut up her mouth, as he went on, "Thank Allah! my wife is dead. You know, I never really intended to marry her. It was father—let him be in Heaven now—who insisted. He knew I loved you so much but he had long ago promised her old father, the upland shepherd. But in marriage, I never forgot you, my fairy child. And now you're here for a brief while."

"This is a lovely night." She was quite right. The willows wafted a pleasant breeze about them. The maize crop that they overlooked and watched from the loft sent them a fresh scent that intoxicated but did not inebriate. The lovers wanted to live like this for ever and ever. But man's wishes rarely find fulfilment in a world where circumstances victimise him and crash his fond world of enchantment in no time.

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"Darling, will you love me like this for ever and ever?" broke from the lips of Akbar Khan—still in his dreamland.

His amorous words were drowned by crashing sounds of maize, plants being cut and felled to the ground in whole bushels, as it were. Akbar Khan disentangled himself suddenly from Jani's embrace. He put on his clothes in a tense moment, listening to the devastation of his maize patch.

Jani squatted up, arranging her hair. He simply whispered, "A bear! I must have the brute's head." Carrying his gun, he noiselessly alighted to the ground.

Starlight guided his stealthy steps towards the scene of bestial vandalism. He spotted the huge black form, not standing up on the hind legs in the usual depredatory pose of the bear but using its mouth. Seeing that it was clear rifle range, he assured himself in an unthinking moment, "It must be a bear. I'll thunder it and run back to my love's warm body."

There was a resounding echo from the hills as he fired. The form fell at the first shot, emitting a last curious sound, piteous and loud. Unlike a bear! Fatah, sleeping in another nearby loft, jumped down straight on the maize holding and was beside Akbar Khan, saying, "So you've got the devil! Fallen?"

"Let us be cautious," warned Akbar Khan as they groped towards the dead body. A last wriggle and moan. They felt the body all over.

"Horns! it has horns," shouted Fatah.

"What have I done? I've killed a bull," shouted Akbar Khan in dismay, letting his rifle fall from his shoulder.

"It is the Nambardar's big bull, his pride, his treasure. You have done a blunder, Akbar. Now, come on, we'll remove the dead body just now, so that no one knows."

Fatah, Akbar Khan's old friend and neighbour, proved the proverbial friend in need.

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He fetched a pole and ropes from his home while Akbar Khan went to kiss and inform Jani of what had happened. He helped her down the loft, held her in his arms till he heard Fatah calling. She left towards her father's home, secretly, for Fatah did not know that she was there.

The huge dead body was tied over and over again with ropes to the pole. They hung the pole over their shoulders and lifted, staggering, the beast, who appeared to have grown weightier in death. Only these two sturdy mountaineer-farmers could do this feat of carrying the massive dead body of the bull down the sloping path, wading across brooks and streams. The common fear of discovery gave them energy and will. They trudged down to the roaring mountain stream and unloaded into it the carcass of the Nambardar's bull.

It was with the consent and knowledge of her mother that Jani would, whenever she came to her father's home, visit Akbar Khan. Her mother had wanted that Jani should have married him but Fate, impersonated by Akbar Khan's domineering father, had worked otherwise.

Early in the night, Jani's mother heard her soft rap on the door of the low mud cottage. She undid the latch without awakening her husband or her children.

"Why have you come back so early?" asked her mother suspiciously. "Did he give you any money and salt?"

"Do I go to him for money?" retorted Jani, panting.

"No, dear, I know you love Akbar Khan. But I've a big family and my husband's illness—"

"Now, shut up and listen," interrupted Jani in the manner of a woman bursting with secret news, which she cannot but share with a kindred spirit. "Akbar Khan shot the Nambardar's bull dead?"

"Nambardar's bull! My Allah? What will happen to him now?" She croaked on with her fears about Akbar Khan, for his absence in jail would mean the loss of cash and kind that she extorted from Akbar

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Khan, mostly without knowledge of Jani. Jani rolled in bed, finding no sleep.

At the first hint of dawn, she left her home with a pitcher, saying to her mother, that she would fetch water from the tarn. She took her way to her lover's loft instead but she did not find him there.

As light spread and the singing birds sang cheerfully, she stood up on her toes on the loft. The loft shook, dangerously, but she balanced herself to have a look at Fatah's loft. There she found the grass disturbed and did not find him there. Strange fears upset her.

Soon she heard Akbar Khan and Fatah talking. They were laughing. Her heart still pounded like a hammer. She ducked in for a while to avoid Fatah catching her sight. They separated.

Her loft shook. He gave a cry of delight on seeing her there.

"My temptress! My Laila! Listen." He told her what he and Fatah had done with the corpse of the Nambardar's bull.

Busy months passed away. The maize harvest was neatly stored away in the granaries. Akbar Khan had paid off his hired labourers. Now he idly smoked his mountaian *hookah* — a small handy apparatus, more useful than beautiful. He said to Fatah, "Does the bastard Nambardar now talk about his lost bull?"

In reply, Fatah roared with laughter. Tears came to his eyes, Akbar Khan also joined him in boisterous laughter. Fatah said, "The big sensation of the disappeared bull has after all died. But the Nambardar has not yet lost hope of finding some trace of the bull. They say he is sure that he can spot his bull out of a vast herd. You know, he had branded his clan mark on the bull's rump. He thinks his beloved bull is still alive!"

That tickled them to still more boisterous merriment.

"We must not laugh so much," forebodingly philosophised Akbar Khan. "Anything may happen after such guffaws."

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And, it did happen. The tragi-comedy that Life is, it does brush aside a complacent triumph with a crashing misfortune.

The blustering Nambardar, at the head of ill-clad mountain police-men, the Patwari and other petty village somebodies, made a dramatic entry into Akbar Khan's open courtyard. Akbar Khan and Fatah were as if spellbound as they stood up, uncertain and tongue-tied.

The Nambardar advanced and prefaced his tirade with rough and heavy slaps on the faces of Akbar Khan and Fatah. "You thieves, you rogues," he raved, "You drove me mad. You killed my bull, you drowned his dead body. May Allah send you to hell and kill you in your bloom as you killed him, my big bull."

The villagers gaped at the handcuffed prisoners. Fatah's wife and children cried and wept. Akbar Khan, seeing them, confessed, "Don't weep, my dear children, Fatah is blameless. He will be freed soon." He said to himself. "You've none to weep for your separation, Akbar. Sweet Jani is away over the mountain-tops with her cursed horse-faced husband."

A policeman's kick hurried him on the path and broke his mad thoughts. He hardly minded the insult. Only one policeman accompanied the prisoners and the Nambardar and others. Seven of them 'occupied' the village. Akbar Khan's home was emptied of its valuables, blankets, brass vessels, quilts, etc. Fatah's wife was well scrutinised by a lusty policeman who was posted in the village to keep guard over Akbar Khan's and Fatah's property. Other policemen, aided by the Patwari and Nambardar, freely extorted money and eatables from other villagers—at least three rupees from each family, eggs, poultry, maize-flour, green vegetables, spices, salt, oil and anything else, that they could lay their greedy hands on.

The police sergeant, with his apology for headquarters in a hovel in the town, needed not much use of torture to make the prisoners confess. The Nambardar spat with satisfaction over a smoke as Akbar Khan was beaten and maltreated. The Tehsildar finished the case soon. The chief witness was Jani's mother. Jani was not to be found as she was yet away in some mountain meadow. The prisoners pleaded guilty. The Tehsildar, already bribed by Fatah's father-in-law, freed Fatah with a fine and damages. Akbar Khan was sentenced to six

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months' rigorous imprisonment and fined one hundred rupees and, furthermore, he had to pay damages to the Nambardar.

Akbar Khan was puzzled when he saw Jani 's mother—the ungrateful procuress, he thought—as the woman who had betrayed him. He was silent for most part of the trial. The Nambardar looked pleased and avenged as the policemen ordered the prisoner to follow them in their usual, uncouth manner.

The villagers, afraid of the Nambardar, did not even greet the prodigal Akbar Khan, as he, thinned and clad in rags, walked laboriously towards his deserted home. Home! it looked a haunted house! Scenes of police *zoolum* rushed back upon Akbar Khan's tired mind as he sank down near the door. It was locked. Who had locked it? Could it be Jani or her devilish mother?

Fatah, having heard of Akbar Khan's return, turned up. He looked so happy on seeing Akbar Khan and embraced him tight. Tears welled in their eyes. It was Fatah who spoke after a period of communicative silence. "Akbar brother, I came to see you in the jail. My son was ill in the City Hospital and I had spent all my savings. I had no *bakhsheesh* for the gate-keeper —may he die this very night—and I was not allowed to see you."

"It is right as it is," said the saddened Akbar Khan.

"Here's the key of your house," said Fatah. "We've kept some of your things, the little that was left by those police dogs. Till you set up home, you come and live with us."

"Home! Shall I ever set up home, now that most of my land is gone. The police, the fines and the damages have made me almost bankrupt."

"Never mind, brother," consoled Fatah. "Now come on."

The welcome accorded to him by Fatah's children, whom he used to get city presents, touched Akbar Khan. Instinctively, he felt his pockets. They were empty and his fingers clawed out of the holes. Fatah understood the pathetic gesture and made him change his

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clothes. They had tea and a good meal.

As Akbar Khan's bed was being made, he said suddenly, "Fatah brother, I shall sleep on my loft."

"No, it is no use. There is only a small patch of maize around it that I got cultivated by a hired labourer. The rest of your land was sold by the Patwari at very small rate to a revenue official's relative to pay off your fines and damages."

"Yes brother, I know that." Akbar Khan insisted. "But I must go there. I feel I must."

When Fatah was gone, Akbar Khan took score of his burning thoughts. Revenge! Kill Jani, her mother, who betrayed the secret of the Nambardar's bull, and kill the Nambardar and be hanged for it. No, not that. Then what? At least Jani's mother was not much to blame. Jani must have told her. Why did she? Why the devil? He looked about and heard the watchman of citywalla's land, his own old land, hooting away the birds. The scent of maize somehow intoxicated him.

He heard a soft rustle. Who was it? Some one came up his loft. Was it she? Jani, his Jani. She climbed up to him, her head popped up; she embraced him passionately, wildly. The loft creaked and trembled. Her tears, hot and flowing, fell on the nape of his neck.

"So you're here, Akbar dear," she said. Forgive me, it's all my fault. My mother was a fool. She talked to the Patwari's wife and—"

"Shut up! You ruined me," he shook himself to unclasp her. "Go to your burly husband."

Kill her, he said to himself. See the end of it all, all this nonsense. But she spoke and her voice was as sweet as ever.

"My husband is dead. He died of a fall from his horse. I...I'll be free to marry any one I like after six months."

"Whom?" he said, puzzled, happy and nervous.

"Kiss me," she said, wiping her tears.

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41

Return of the Native

Rainstorm raged in the forest. The pines whistled long and loud. The firs hissed. The conifers moaned. Frightened birds, running here and there for shelter, squeaked pathetically. An owl's hooting could be discerned when the storm changed its direction for ever so much as a moment. The wind lashed and beat everything before it. Even the immovable rocks and stray boulders seemed to groan under the terrific momentum of the sudden, unusual storm. The brook was swollen in a trice, as it were. Its rising breast seethed with mad water, dashing down boulders and the sides of the banks. The forces of nature that were released so peremptorily shook the entire forest. The day had been clear. The nightfall, revealing the half moon, already high up in the sky much above the line of the bleak mountain-tops, had promised a quiet, cool summer night of the Kashmir forests. But that was not to be, at least for this night. The rainstorm howled on with accelerating fury, unmindful of man and beast, caught within its vortex.

Fati was alone in her *Bahak* (mountain hut) which shook against the side of the mountain. She, a tall, blonde mountain-bred woman of twenty-five, had never witnessed such a storm in her life. The worst of it was that she was alone in her *Bahak*. Her husband, her man, had gone down a descent of about two thousand feet, to fetch eatables and things from the grocer's shop. He had left at noon and he should have returned much earlier than the evening. He had not come. She could not tell why. She was here, in her *Bahak*, all alone. In the hamlet there was only one more *Bahak* but that was empty this night. Its occupants had gone up to a pasture to graze their livestock. Fati was too alone, she thought with a pang. A few furlongs off, down towards the opposite mountainside, there was a hamlet where dwelled some families of Gujars. It was humanly impossible for her to go to that

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hamlet in this raging storm, especially when at this season the maize was ripening and the bear, the lover of maize, rambled during the night everywhere in search of maize and man.

Why had not her 'man', her 'native' returned so far? What could possibly have detained him? What had happened to the pony that he was to ride on this return? Had the money-lender, who had fleeced him for years, though he had already paid two times the principal, met him and had him taken before the Tehsildar—that wily, corrupt, fire-eating official? Or—oh! the pain of the thought—was he belated and did he meet a bear on his ascent back, perhaps near the confluence of the *Nullas* where there were several bear dens? No, no, that cannot be. But that may be—. Oh Allah! Have pity on me, she prayed. She had married him only these three years. She loved him, his body, his kindliness, his chivalrous nature. She need not fear, she assured herself. He carried the axe, the axe with which he had already felled the uncouth and ugly heads of two big, black bears and a third, on another occasion, when she accompanied him, had run away at mere sight of the flashing steel. Allah saves good men! She kneeled and prayed but she found herself shaking with fear and cold. The roof had started leaking at several vulnerable places. The fire in the hearth was reduced to cinders. Blasts of wind rudely beat against her face. Not a muscle twitched in her body as she tensely listened to the whining of some cattle outside the *Bahak*, sheltered under overhanging *Kachloo* trees.

The rain would do no harm to the cattle, she decided. But did a bear come to molest and kill them? At the hint of suspicion, she seized her axe and rushed outside. Terrific force of the wind disallowed her to walk straight. She wrapped her apron-cloth around her and, slowly, with bent back, advanced towards the cattle. The cows, bulls and buffaloes were all standing close together almost in a circle. She moved about them and counted them.

Where was her favourite, spotted cow, who carried the tinkling bells? She was shocked and was like mad. Groping her way about the flock, she reached near the edge of the precipice where stood a solitary conifer. Under it, to her immense relief, she found her loved cow. Thank Allah! she was safe. Allah! now keep my husband also safe, she prayed, as a gust of the storm almost swayed her over the precipice. Her watch dog, who was by her side, since she came out to look up her flock, caught the lappet of her *chemise* so that she succeeded in balancing herself. As a sign of gratitude, she took the head of the dog

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within her palms and patted his drenched, woolly body. To safeguard her favourite cow, she pushed her well within the flock so that, if the depredatory bear attacked the herd, he would not get at her, at any rate.

With her dog following her close, Fati laboured her way through the pebbly slush to her *Bahak*. She felt miserably cold. She raked up the live cinders and, adding a few faggots, made a good fire out of them in her usual skilful way. The flames leaped up, warming her cold limbs. But the wind, still unabated, lashed the flames to and fro, so that a flame actually caught a sheaf of hay stuck up in the parallel beams of the low ceiling of the *Bahak*. Seeing the hay catching fire, Fati gave a shriek but she did the most practical thing by first throwing a pot of water over the hearth and thus quite extinguishing the fire in it and then, drenching an old blanket with another pot of water, she threw it straight up at the burning hay and held it on against the ceiling till the flames went out. She said aloud, "Allah, it is too much for me! Where is my man? When will he return?" Now she felt more benumbed than ever in her life. She had forgotten to save a few cinders, which she would have kept in her *Kangri*. Her flint was not to be found anywhere. Now how could she light a fire? She sat on the raised hearth so that she could look out over the stone wall. She saw the dark clouds breaking and the dim light of the half-moon could be discerned behind fleeting clouds. The wind was losing its force. The rain had slowed down to a regular drizzle. She felt exhausted, feeling very sleepy. Her strong resistance was failing her. The dark earth seemed to be swimming before her eyes. Despair overtook hope—hope for her man's return—deep within her. She shifted her position to go to a corner and lie down there. But she was already staggering. She did not make the bend, to which she was unconsciously accustomed, near the centre of the low ceiling of the *Bahak* where the central beam projected down from the ceiling. She struck her head against it. Hardly conscious of the excruciating pain, thanks to the benumbing cold spread all over her body, she fell down with a thud on the wet, grass-covered floor of the *Bahak*. There she lay, flat and motionless, her dog moving restlessly about the room and whining, and her cow, licking her with her rough tongue.

Lower down on the mountainside, in one of the few *Bahaks*, lived Aziz Khan, a tall, lean youth, who loved Fati before she married Ramzana Khan. He still loved her. Before her marriage he had once

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attempted to seduce her but she had scared him away with her small hatchet which she carried whenever she tended her flock alone. Thus tantalised, Aziz Khan always had some evil designs about her, but his fear of the hefty, broad-shouldered Ramzana Khan, who could, single-handed, kill three men with his axe, kept him back.

In the afternoon of this day, he heard from a lad that Ramzana Khan had gone down to the shop and that he was wearing his red, embroidered waistcoat. Would he take his chance with Fati in her man's absence? No, he dared not do so alone—for he still feared her. His party was not here, how he regretted that. Still, he posted two shepherd lads on the mountainpath to let him know when Ramzana Khan would return. Late in the evening, when the storm appeared to be gathering, the lads informed Aziz Khan that Ramzana Khan had not yet returned. They then went home.

Aziz Khan became curious. He kept watch from his *Bahak* on the path to see when Ramzana Khan would return. Then the storm came. Trees crashed and torrents of water ran alongside Aziz Khan's *Bahak*. Of course, Ramzana Khan could make no further progress from the place where he might have been stopped, so reasoned Aziz Khan.

The furious and forceful wind fanned the flame of Aziz Khan's passion for Fati. Her well cut features, her almond eyes, her chiselled mouth and bows of eyebrows, and all the grace of her form, formed an exciting image before him even out of the overwhelming darkness. He must go up to her. But, curse the wind, it was developing into a rain-storm that promised no end. Stuck to his post, he waited for the least sound of Ramzana Khan's pony. None came. Wickedly enough, he thought, that a bear must have made a meal of Ramzana Khan. Voluptuous pictures of Fati danced before him as the wind after all appeared to die down. When it did stop, he trudged up towards the *Bahak* where Fati had just swooned.

The wet floor had further benumbed the prostrate body of Fati. Her hair fell to one side while she still lay in a swoon. Her slim outline and her white *Salwar* could be seen in the light of the half-moon. Aziz Khan was greeted by the dog who recognised him from a distance. With the dog at his heels, he rushed into the *Bahak* with his vicious thoughts heating him all over. He was shocked to find Fati lying

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motionless and seemingly lifeless on the floor. Oh! this was an opportunity which he could not let go for nothing! She was, fortunately, not armed. She would perhaps not object. Even while he bent low to impress a kiss upon her cheeks, he found her cheeks cold, dead cold, as it were. The freezing touch somehow electrified him. In a trice, his passion cooled off. Divine pity overtook fiendish lust in him. He must save her; that he must.

In a moment, Aziz Khan took out the flint from his pocket and lit some straw with the spark inside the fire-place where he got a fire burning. He put some water in it to be heated for the tea. He removed her, his old, dear Fati, to a dry corner of the *Bahak* where he made her recline on a straw cushion and covered her with several blankets. From the fire he fed a big *Kangri* and placed that within the folds of the blanket close to her. He put Kashmiri tea in the kettle to feed her with.

Fati opened her eyes. She blurted out, faintly, yet hopefully, "Ramzana Khan, you, you have come. Where..." At this Aziz Khan, who up to now was standing before the hearth with his back to her, turned round. She stopped short, aghast and scandalised, and could not proceed with her words. She looked at him in utter amazement and tried to work out what had happened some time back. Her stupefied look enthralled him and rendered him speechless.

They heard the sound of the heavy tread of a pony walking in the slush outside. Obviously Ramzana Khan had come. The leaping flames of the fire lit the room. Aziz Khan crossed over to conceal himself behind a rustic curtain on which were hung old clothes. Simultaneously, Ramzana Khan came in, shouting impatiently, "Fati, where are you? I have brought you a necklace." He did not mind his dog who crouched about his feet, affectionately, wagging his big tail. Catching sight of Fati, lying down, Ramzana Khan impetuously crossed towards her, sat by her, kissed her, saying, "What has happened? What is this? But whose shadow crossed the room as I came in?"

Fati said, "He..he was here.." but before she had finished, Ramzana Khan, wielding his axe, searched about the *Bahak* and, discerning a movement behind the curtain, stepped towards it dashingly. Aziz Khan came out and stammered, "I....I'm here ..I.."

Ramzana Khan looked at him with bloodshot eyes, "You here!

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You rogue! You came here because my wife was alone, unprotected. Now I shall fell your skull with this". Raising aloft his axe, he added, "You rogue, you don't know that I'm her husband."

"Forgive me, Ramzana Khan, I have not touched her." Aziz Khan replied, falling low.

"You say you have not touched her. How could you dare, you devil? Have this." He kicked him brutally and slapped him with his left hand, striking him against the stone wall. Aziz Khan was wounded in the face and his cheek bled, giving him a hideous look.

Fati had stood up by this time. She faced her husband dauntlessly, saying, "You stop that, Ramzana Khan. He has really helped me. He made that fire. He put me in the bed and wrapped me with the blankets. He has saved me. I should have died of cold otherwise."

"Is it? Is it?" escaped the dazed lips of Ramzana Khan.

Fati locked Ramzana Khan in a warm embrace for a while, saying, "So you've returned, my Native. Let me dress Aziz Khan's wound and then I shall serve you tea."

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42
Vendetta

The ripened maize quivered in the evening breeze. So did the throbbing heart of Juma, as he lay concealed among overwhelming maize, biting his finger nails and listening intently in the direction of the small fragrant path between the holdings through which she would come. Her tall form, her bewitching blonde beauty, her soft flesh and the jingle of her trinkets already tormented him, as he looked again and again towards the sun. He did not mark the panoramic splendour of the west, the fired clouds, the glowing snow-capped peaks, heaving their enchanting conical breasts above the mist of the Happy Valley, or, the mad torrents and gay, rippling brooks stretched around the lush maize fields. Anxiously, he blinked at the elliptic sun, awaiting its dip behind the mountain, for she would come after sunset. Oh! Allah is one! Allah be praised! The sun did set. A perfect twilight followed. The faint light of the full moon, already risen high in the east, harmonised with the last struggling glimmers of the day. Juma loved the moonlight. It heightened the exquisite charm of her body, sweet, soft, strong...

Presently he heard footsteps. She was coming. His wife be cursed; why did her memory disturb him in these moments of bliss? Shading his turban with the maize stalks, he peered out. Two children were playfully returning to the village. Damn them, their sight disappointed him. And they reminded him of his own children, miles and miles away, sitting before the big hearth, helping their mother. Mehtab must have come. She ought to see the sunset and know the hour. Tense, restless and expectant, he was losing his patience now.

"CHOH....CHOH". Some peasant was shouting after fagged oxen, returning from the maize fields. Homing birds started a merry choir. Juma was in no mood to listen to the senseless birds. Their songs sounded like so much chatter to him. Through these notes he made an effort to discern a rustling sound. He was right. She was coming. His witch, his love, his very life. She came, walking gracefully towards

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him; the mysterious, ethereal twilight clothing her in an enthralling voluptuous beauty. She found herself in the steel embrace of Juma, who, kissing her passionately all over her face, kept on saying, "My life, you kept me waiting." Blood rose to her cheeks and her warm contact maddened Juma, making him get over the disconcerting sense of guilt.

"Where were you, you prostitute?" shouted out Ibil, as Mehtab covertly stepped in the room. "Where did you disappear? You illegitimate woman, do you think you can throw dust in my eyes? No you can't. I've found out all about the devil Juma." As the jealous husband named his rival, he felt his blood boiling. He went on, fiercely, bitterly. "You beautiful coquette, have this"—kicking her savagely in the sides with his heavy hobnailed *chappal* — "don't fall, stand up. You're a brave girl."

Prostrate in a heap, restraining her tears, Mehtab imploringly appealed, "Mercy, Ibil dear. Forgive me!"

"Mercy! You talk of mercy! You deserve mercy! You call me 'dear'."

Balancing his mountaineer's turban to a more haughty angle with his left hand, he unhooked his new horse-hair whip from the mud-plastered, smoky wall. "One....two..three...." he counted to "two tens" as he, clutching her long plaited hair, lashed the crying Mehtab with the whip. She made not much effort to free herself as that only pained her hair. Tears rolled down her cheeks, which had lost their flush by now.

She groaned as each stroke fell, asking no more for mercy. Fortunately Ibil's brother came back. He returned from his trek to the *Margs* — upland meadows — over their village. He was bursting with news and he held back his conventional *salaam* as he saw his brother, counting "two tens and five" over fallen Mehtab.

"What's it, Ibil brother?" he demanded. "I've news."

"Damn your news", Ibil darted back, harshly. "My faithless wife must have it first. I'll kill her."

Ibil saw his brother's determined look as he came towards him and wrested the whip from his hands.

"She will confess", he said.

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So she did. She, genuinely repenting, confessed all about Juma's next visit to her.

"You will meet him when he comes," Ibil commanded, "tell him that I know nothing. Invite the bastard to a night feast. We'll see you make him promise. We will watch behind the maize. We won't yet reap the maize of the patch that formed your cursed meeting place."

On the appointed day, Ibil made his wife go to the meeting place much earlier than the sunset. A cold autumnal wind swept over the bared, harvested fields. Leaves fell from mulberry and poplar trees. The trees made a moaning sound as the wind struck them rudely. The falling leaves danced their way down the trees. Dance of death, so brooded Mehtab, as she reluctantly took her seat upon the raised edge of the holding. Ibil said to her, "Remember," in authoritative tone, and he and his brother hid behind thick maize, a few yards away from Mehtab.

"So you're here, dear," Juma said, effusively, as he hurried towards her. "Today I've not to wait for you, my life."

Mehtab bit her lip as he again called her 'dear'! How would that word sound to Ibil, she thought? Juma, sitting beside her on the hardened edge of the holding, kissed her impetuously again and again. Ibil, hearing the sound of the kisses, made as if to come out of his ambush, but for his brother who caught him in his arms, whispering, "You wait, have patience, Ibil dear. Let her invite him."

"I heard a rustling," Juma suspiciously said to Mehtab, as he nestled close to her, thrusting his right hand down her undergarments to her heaving, solid breasts.

"It must be a jackal rat," she said turning her head away. After a time, she added, "No, next time," as she looked into his eyes, reddening and nervous, and caught his meaning.

"But why? You are cold to-day. You're avoiding my eyes, my life. I'll cross hell for you...."

She stopped him, eager to finish up, a heart-rending conflict raging within her. Hastily she said, "Ibil is unsuspecting. We invite you to feast at ours on Friday next. Will you come?"

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"Sure, dear." He imprinted a few more kisses on her face, embraced her and, suddenly, let her go. She did not look back at him when he left, as she used to.

Pale, breathless, and almost giddy, she let Ibil hold her hand as they took their way home. There, Ibil and his brother, talked aside for hours while she baked the maize bread and cooked the jungle vegetables. A heavy weight lay on her heart. She did her domestic work mechanically. Her restless left eye told her that some trouble was astir. Unconsciously she prepared herself for what was to come.

Friday came. Ibil made arrangements for the feast. He had invited several neighbours so that it should look a real feast. He gave hurried orders to Mehtab : "Roast the chicken well. We will have no jungle vegetables but city vegetables and use the city spices but not too much. We will have sugar tea tonight before we set out."

"Where?" There was perturbed anxiety in her voice.

"Horse-stealing," he replied, curtly.

But Mehtab marked that Ibil did not look flurried as he did usually on feast days. Only he, towards the afternoon, looked out of the low window, towards the path which ran by the torrent, where the forest terminated into the *Marg*, saying impatiently, "The cursed fellow—damn his sister — is not come yet. May be, his rickety pony stumbled somewhere and gave him a fatal fall." Why was he so very eager for Juma's coming, thought Mehtab? She saw that Ibil and his brother avoided her as they fell together and talked and talked—Ibil, impatient and hot, while his brother appeared to be less nervy about the affair. What was it? She did not know. She could not guess. She wished more than ever that Juma would not come. But Juma was their guest. They were having other guests. Surely, he would be treated as one.

Earlier than the evening, Juma came, accompanied by his big watch-dog, riding his bony but tough pony. Ibil's brother warmly received him and when Ibil did see him, he was unnaturally freezing. Why? But Mehtab had no time to think. Other guests had come. The meal was to be served.

The merry feast was happily shared by every one except Ibil, who ate sparingly from the large copper plate with his brother and a guest. But he made attempts to shake himself from his depression. Ibil's brother made the guests feel at home as they talked about the recent epidemic of fowl, the ill-known Tehsildar's greedy nature, the extorting city-bred clever Patwari who had received a sound thrashing at the

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hands of a young mountaineer, at whose wife he had made indecent advances, the excellent maize crop—Juma boasted that he would become a rich man this winter after the harvest profits would stream in—and the result of crossing their watch-dogs with a breed of the Valley dogs.

Kashmiri sugar tea followed the meal close. The guests tooth-picked and enjoyed the tea at the same time. Juma unwarily gave Mehtab a fond look as she poured his tea. She did not look back. As she moved over to another guest, Juma saw Ibil's dangerous glance upon him. Their eyes met for a trice. What does it matter that I look at her, thought Juma? I don't eat her—Ibil's Laila — with my eyes. What can this sneak do to me? I've my new hatchet and my dagger on me, he went on thinking—and well, the watch-dog who helped me to kill two bears, not to speak of men-jackals like Ibil! His brother is so nice. No, no, there can be no mischief, Juma reassured himself. The other guests are here, he reminded himself. The feast ended abruptly and in the brusque manner of the mountaineers, they, wiping their beards and steadying their turbans and blankets, left with little formality. Juma was about to depart but Ibil's brother said to him, as the last guest left. "Juma, we want you to help us. You're brave, you're strong. We're going to go horse-stealing in the Cow-Dung Marg where wealthy Bakravallas have camped from yesterday. You've a small pony, we've none. Come on, we join and we help one another. Ibil is getting ready."

Juma, feeling flattered at the mention of his prowess, agreed readily. Whatever hint of suspicion he had was set off by his complacent thought that he had his axe and dagger and his watch-dog with him. The idea of horse-stealing excited him and he, taking up a rope which lay near him, said to Ibil's brother, "Look here! This is my noose. Mark the knot. It is deadly in its aim. How many ropes shall we carry? Five, yes, that's right, brother. Here is Ibil. Oh! he is quite ready. We leave then."

"Yes, we are ready. My neighbours' ponies are saddled outside. Make haste." Ibil was preemptory.

They left. Mehtab heard the clatter of the ponies from the kitchen. A deep foreboding produced anguish in her woman's intuitive heart. She said nothing and suspected only a little. The watch-dog of Juma barked after his master as he was kennelled, for, as Ibil's brother suggested to Juma, they would not take any dogs with them. Dogs might give an unnecessary alarm. Ibil led, Juma followed and Ibil's brother rode upon their heels. Jackals howled groaningly after them. Juma's dog whined and barked helplessly after his master Juma reassured himself. Harm? No, who could dare? He had his axe and dagger and he could handle his pony as he liked, for he rode his own pony unlike Ibil and his brother. And he was a match for both of them; they knew that. Ibil cursed the pony that he rode upon.

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Ibil reined in as they reached a *marg*, still muttering curses on his pony. To Juma's question, "Why do you stop, Ibil?" he said, quickly, "The ponies have tired us. Here we'll have some rest and we'll complete our plan of action."

They dismounted. Where should they tie their ponies? Ibil's brother took out his flint and making fire on hay, lit the rustic torch—a bundle of 'lashi' faggots. The flames of the virgin fire played merrily in the night breeze. Juma thought of Mehtab and his wife and childern. Ibil did not return his gaze and busied himself with the ponies, tethering them with long ropes so that they could graze about. They heard the unmistakable grunts and snorts of a bear. The peculiar fierceness of these sounds signified that it was a she-bear, depredatory and fearless. But none of them minded or even mentioned the fact.

As they sat down to rest on the drying grass, over the crackling bed of the dead and decaying leaves, Ibil's brother remarked casually. "The Bakravallas are many in number. One of us might get caught. They would not kill him but bind him with ropes and, later, produce him before the police. Ibil, suppose they bind you....."

"Come on, try ropes on me," Ibil, interrupting him, replied boastfully, "I'll show you how I can free myself."

"Yes, let us do it," agreed Ibil's brother, as he took up a loose rope and started binding his hands and feet. Juma helped and fastened some knots which he alone could tie due to his "superior knowledge", as he put it. Juma playfully said to Ibil, "Now, free yourself."

Ibil tried his best but he failed. He confessed biting his lip scornfully, "I fail."

Juma eagerly said, "Come on, you weak fellows, bind me and I'll show you".

"But we must first disarm you," put in Ibil's brother, "and then we can test your strength and see how you free yourself. If you do so, you will, of course, lead us against the Bakravallas."

With the quickness of lightning, Ibil snatched Juma's axe and pulled out his dagger from his mountaineer's belt.

While so doing, Ibil saw the loosened end of his wife's handkerchief stuck in the pocket of his belt. Its sight burned him but he said nothing and he and his brother bound Juma with the ropes. They tied his wrists together on his back and they fastened the hardest knots from which no Gama could extricate himself.

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Juma did not see Ibil's face for the rustic torch burnt at their back as they bound him. There was a certain barbaric rudeness about Ibil and his brother while they tied the ropes over and over again on his body. Mad thoughts rushed to Juma's brain, while he said to them, "Why, you've used the entire length of the rope. It is humanly impossible to free oneself...."

A yell of triumph rose from Ibil and his brother. The ponies gave a start and neighed. An owl ominously hooted somewhere. Ibil took out his fine deadly axe and gave terrible blows to the head of Juma. Juma gave a terrible heart-rending cry, as he fell back. But it did not soften Ibil or his brother; who stood by, while Ibil savagely shouted to his brother, "Drag the brute....Prop his hulk against that pine's trunk." They did so, letting the axe remain clinging to his unhinged shoulder.

"Juma bastard!" raved Ibil, "love Mehtab and kiss her now! Cross the hell for her!"

Juma groaned, "For Allah's sake, have mercy!"

"Mercy!" continued Juma. "You'll die a dog's death that you deserve. I let the axe remain kissing your plagued shoulder because I want you to let us know your last wish which we may fulfil immediately."

"Give me a puff at your *chilum*," came the suddenly weakened words, "I'm dying, O Allah!"

Ibil's brother filled his *chilum* with tobacco and loaded it at once with cinders from the torch. He freed Juma's left hand and he greedily puffed at it several times, when Juma snatched it from him and threw it away.

With the terrible alacrity of a leopard, Ibil disentangleld the axe from Juma's shoulder and shouting, "Mountaineer's Vendetta!!!" several times, hit a more ghastly blow on Juma's left shoulder. Juma sank down, bleeding all over profusely.

"Mountaineer's Vendetta! Juma bastard will no longer rape my wife."

Ibil gave another blow on Juma's head, not knowing that he was already cold all over.

The wind blew out the torch and the she-bear's snorts were distinct, menacing and near.

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43

Her Man Gula

Qadir poured Kashmiri salt tea from the *Samovar* in several cups for his brothers and children who clustered about him in the compound. He did not quite fill Gula's cup as he did that of others. He burst out at Gula, "After all how long will this be, you Gula? You've not done an ounce of work for the last six months. The air of Punjab blessed you with the seasonal fever that absolutely spoiled you. Now you're better, you could work and not laze away."

"Well, yes," said Gula, feebly, reflectively, "I'll think."

"You'll think," retorted Qadir, pouring himself another cup and not asking Gula whether he would have more. "To hell with you, you're not the son of our father, you rascal."

Anger clouded Gula's face. But it was impotent anger. He had lost his nerve long ago after he returned from Lahore, a wrecked malarial patient. When he came home he did not find his wife there. She had been ill-treated by Qadir and Satara and she had gone to her father's house. That shocked him and his protracted illness disabled him from work. He had done no work for these many months. His wife, Habba, sweet, tall, brunette beauty, did not return. As the children, Qadir's and Satara's children, played about him and Qadir helped himself to still another cup of salt tea and a crumb of a city cake, he over-turnec his empty cup. His idle gaze flashed across the green fields to the distant snow-capped mountains catching the golden rays of a gorgeous autumnal sunset. Kites ponderously returned to their lofty Chinar nests. Some of them sailed smoothly in twos. With a pang he thought of his Habba and fell into a desperate reverie, quite unmindful of the oxen being tethered, the cattle penned, the children clamouring for more rice and the bleating of the calf and sheep.

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Gula was really Ghulam Mohammad. They used to call him that before he migrated to Punjab, when he and his newly-married wife, Habba, worked hard in the field. Indoor, during long winter of Kashmir, Habba excelled at shawl-spinning and he beat all the villagers at basket-making. The shawl that her clever fingers turned out sold well in the town market. Villagers crowded round him in the evening when he would repair their baskets or the wicker work of their *Kangris* — Kashmiri fire-pots. He was respected then. His friends would joke at him about his charmer of a wife. She was a houri, they would tease him. The cursed wander-lust had seized him as the winter had been heralded by late autumn. The Chinar leaves had fallen. And his happiness also did, as he found to his cost, later.

Against the protestations of his mother and wife, he had left for the plains with a party of migratory peasants. There he fell a prey to malaria. He worked even in fever for he had to save money to get so many things for his parents, brothers, sisters and wife and, his nephews. He purchased some of their choice things as he, reduced to a mere skeleton, returned to his home in early spring. Scenes of humiliation and suffering rushed across his mind. But he had stood it all, heartened by the hope that he would return to his happy family. The spring that gave new life to everything took away his, as rude shocks encountered him at his home. Habba, whom Satara had attempted to rape, had run away swearing that she would never return to this home where "men were devils, and women, prostitutes." Cold welcome awaited Ghulam Mohammad at his home. He received it with all the grace that he could command. No one liked his presents much. They grudged nursing him back to health. Labour in the fields left no hand but his choleric old father to attend upon him. He became "Gula" — as his health failed him.

Ill-fed and ill-nursed, Gula never quite regained his lost health. Habba, who used to call him "Her man, Gula," did not come back. He heard scandalous and fantastic rumours about her and all these agreed on the conclusion that she would divorce Gula, for he was not a match for her. That would cut him to the quick. So he lived on, dreaming away his sad days, not doing an ounce of work. He was dazed, lost, desperate. Pinned to the spot, he made no effort to shake himself as the sun disappeared behind the soothing, curving mountain-line. The glowing evening star, looking so bright and yet so lonely, painfully pictured Habba, his Habba, to him. He cursed himself and struck his forehead again and again with his outstretched hands.

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Somebody came towards him. From the step he discerned that it was his mother. He did not turn round.

She stopped just behind him. Maternal intuition gave her a sudden insight into her son's desperate mind, as she said sympathetically, placing her hand on his drooping head, "Ghulama, come in now. It's so late. We've all finished our meal, I've kept your rice in an earthen bowl over the hot cow-dung cinders in the fire-place."

A sigh escaped Gula as he bitterly thought that she alone still called him, "Ghulama."

"All right, mother, I shall follow directly."

Mad thoughts crowded his brain as he went to the stream to make water and to cleanse himself. Would he pray? Pray to whom? No, God and man had forsaken him. Reluctantly, he retraced hesitant steps to the cottage.

It was midnight. A starry sky played over the field. An owl screeched on the dark Chinar flanking the sinuous stream. Jackals howled behind the line of maidenly willows by the wide marsh. A flock of jungle birds, invisible in the sky, made quick flight above Gula. Their swift rustle and squeaky sounds disturbed the maddening reflections of Gula. The evening star was lost among the maze of stars now. But he saw a pale yellow star somewhere in the firmament and, curiously enough, it reminded him of Habba, the tanned roses of her oval cheeks. Indifferently, the golden star twinkled back at him, sending him no message of consolation.

So they sent me here, all alone to shiver in the night, with this ragged blanket on me, Gula thought. Their words still rang, sharp, biting and reproachful, in his ears. As he finished his frugal evening meal, for which they had spared so little of vegetable for him, Qadira had said, "This night I am tired. Satara is down with fever. Somebody must keep watch over the patch of maize which is ripe. I say, Sheikh, give ear to me. Tell your stay-at-home Gula to go out and do this bit of soft work at least." The Sheikh, their father, had warmed up. His wife had whispered something to the Sheikh but still he had fulminated, "Gula is unearthly, a poet, a *faqir*, for aught I know. Sure, Gula can go there. He knows how to sleep. And he has slept enough during the day..." These cutting remarks had continued. Even Satara from his

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sick bed had his say, adding a few more insulting remarks. Gula thought of Qadir's eldest son who had volunteered to come out with him but his wife had snatched him away, bluntly expressing her fears, "A bear might come there. I can't allow my light to risk a meeting with a bear."

Then Gula, taking up his old scythe, left his home. Nobody asked him whether his *Kangri* had enough fuel for the night. He had heard, "Thank Allah! he has left, let him never return," coming presumably from Qadir, as the door was slammed after him. The dog, whom Habba used to love and feed so well, nestled close to him as he paused awhile in the compound. Dog and man, who is more faithful? Oh! it is the dog, he reasoned with a pang, as the dog sniffed him close all over. He heard the sound of his heavy wagging tail. And yet, he mused bitterly, Kashmiris say "a dog's face" to indicate rudeness, "like a dog" to insinuate faithlessness and shamelessness. Man was more faithless and shameless than dog could ever be. The dog barked away as it heard other dogs giving an alarm.

Alone, all alone, Gula reached the maize holding and there he lay down. Voluptuous images of Habba danced before his eyes. No, hang it, he reflected aggressively. This life is a burden. Do away with it. Very easy. All the miseries of this world will cease at one stroke. Somebody whispered, "No, don't do it, Ghulama." His mother admonished him. His split brain somehow echoed her words. He heard a rustle. The faint starlight showed nothing. Would that it were a bear! That would spare him the means with which to kill himself. He discerned a dark form advancing towards him. But it was small for a bear. Its eyes did not glow. It was his dog, the only faithful creature left in the world for him. The dog, coming close to him, crouched. Its affectionate movements revived piercing memories of Habba. Too much for me. This world is too cruel for me! Fly away from it, he resolved. Stars appeared to fade away as mist spread over them. The mountain-line also dimmed suddenly. Why need he look about? Everything was now reeling. Let it. Gula felt his scythe. Its edge was rather blunt. It would do the work. He gave several hard blows to his neck in quick succession. They fell on the upper part of the neck. Blood, blood, blood! One gasping breath; Gula fell down in a heap, the dog whining over him.

The police from the town called the entire village to the common. The body of Gula lay wrapped up in his blanket, on the ground. Noise, jostling and elbowing in the crowd. Everyone pressed near the body.

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The policemen kicked away urchins and slapped youngsters who pestered them. But they did not scare away the heads of families, to whom they said, "You rogues, you were not on good terms with the Sheikh. You've killed his son. We'll get you hanged one and all." The family heads lost their heads at this. They wept, cried, entreated like so many women. Policemen knew no mercy and never showed it. One of them confidently advised one villager as to the blackmail that could save him. Individual bargains were struck up by the freebooter-police.

No *Hakim* saw the body for there was none in the village.The police did not get any with them from the town for they took murder for granted. The Grand Old Man of the village was away in the city of Srinagar. He was the acknowledged local *Hakim*. None could take his place and none did.

The blustering sergeant was arriving, an urchin said. Two policemen left the place to receive him at the stream, wherein one had to wade in knee-deep water. As the sergeant appeared across the stream, the policemen saluted him, clumsily though. Then one kicked a villager with, "Wade across, carry the Thanadar Sahib on your back." The sergeant was ferried across like a bag of paddy. He did not so much as look at the rustic who carried him across, not to speak of thanking him. Villagers, their individual hush money settled by now by the police, ran to the sergeant, "Thanadar Sahib, save us. The extorting policemen ask us for money and paddy and fowl and flour." The sergeant, brandishing his baton, made his way to the body and rebuked the head policeman, after slightly shaking the dangling head, underneath which a tight dirty cloth served as a bandage on the wound, saying, "You've the body removed to the town doctor at once. I saw him at his residence just now and he will confirm death and give us his report."

The head policeman asked the sullen Sheikh to produce a cot and to arrange four men. A broken cot served as the precarious stretcher. While the body was laid on it, a woman's solitary cry rent the air and she moaned aloud, "Thanadar Sahib, Gula killed himself. I saw him lying prostrate in the field with the blood-stained scythe in his hand. Thanadar Sahib, don't be hard on the villagers. They're our good neighbours. Don't take away Qadir, I plead you. He is innocent.." No one heard her.The head policeman simply gave a shrug as the men left with the cot on their shoulders.

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The sergeant curiously eyeing the scythe, saw to it that each and every head of a family gave the cash and kind to the head constable that was demanded of them. One rowdy villager, Qadir and the Sheikh were handcuffed.

A strange and sad bustle prevailed in the village as the red turbans left for the town.

Dust-laden tattered mats covered the mud-plastered floor of the big room of the Thana. The sergeant—known as the Thanadar—more occupied with his *hookah* than with the grovelling appeals of prisoners, tried to look as stern as he could. He said to a policeman, who stood guard over them, "Just shout and call one of these lazy policemen. What are they doing with the crowd in the compound?"

In response to the call, a policeman half in uniform and half in mufti, appeared and made an awkward motion of a salute."I say," came forcibly from the Thanadar, "Why has not the dead man's wife been produced so far? I am told she lives in the nearby hamlet. Send another policeman and hurry her here. Despatch another to Doctor Sahib for his report. If he wants me, let me know directly." Another apology of a salute. The policeman sneaked away while the sergeant righteously shot at the still unruly villager. "You speak of the National Party and of your city leaders. You dare to threaten me! You don't know I am as good as the Tehsildar before whom you'll all be produced tomorrow. Then you'll see, you bastards, I'll have you shut away in prison for at least one year."

"I don't mind", fired back the villager, waving his handcuffed arms, "I'll be heard. You'll see how I'll speak against all your *zoolum*."

Qadir put his hand over the mouth of the revolutionary and appealed to the sergeant, "Thanadar Sahib, he's a fool. He does not know what he is talking about. He has heard too many speeches in the city where big leaders speak only and do nothing. Excuse him, sir. He is a fool."

The sergeant momentarily fell into a moody silence. Nobody spoke for a while. The dust-mantled clock hanging over his head had long since stopped ticking. The crowd, now forced away, collected about the mosque. There were shouts. Why?

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In came Habba, escorted by two policemen and followed by several nervous villagers. She looked bewitching even though beads of tears still clung to her long eyelashes and flowed down her flushed cheeks. The dirty red *pheran*—Kashmiri gown—set off her brunette complexion. She looked about the room but she was not abashed on finding everybody looking at her.

The Thanadar wistfully, with half-closed eyes, drunken with her beauty, stared at her, as wicked ideas popped up in his mind. Oh sure, he comforted himself, she was within his grasp all right. Aloud he said, trying to look his authoritative best, "Tell us all about your dead husband. Why did you desert him, you prostitute?"

Looking fierce as a tigress held at bay, Habba darted back, "Thanadar Sahib, I've nothing of the prostitute in me. I left the house because of Qadir and Satara, disgraceful goondas that they are. But, sir, let me go. Let me have a last look at my husband before he is buried. The villagers were saying that a devil has entered his body. Oh! my Allah!"

Wrenching herself free from the policemen, she fled downstairs melodramatically.

In the stuffy out-patients' room, the Doctor, still wearing his home clothes, bent over the patient whom he had bandaged. The restless policeman spoke aside to a villager, "This new doctor is a boy. What does he think of himself? Why does he not pronounce the fellow as dead? After all we'll have a lot of trouble with the dead body of this Punjab-returned peasant yet."

The Doctor motioned to the policeman to maintain silence. Habba entered just then, shouting, weeping, "My husband! What've they done to you? I loved you, my man Gula. What a lightning has fallen upon me? I shall die now. Let me die." She struck her head against the clumsy cot and swooned off.

Pacing about the verandah outside, the Doctor smoked and thought hard. His children ran about and disturbed him. Convinced of his diagnosis that it was a case of prolonged coma, he took fresh score of the patient's symptoms and developments. He was sure that the upper part of the trachea was not mortally wounded. Life had not quite ebbed away from the body. It might return. He had used all

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possible restoratives. Life should return. The case intrigued him. He heard a cry from the room, "Doctor Sahib, the devil has again entered the body."

The Doctor ran back. To his great professional pleasure, he saw the patient kick his legs again and again. A motion of life—clear and distinct. He felt his pulse. Yes, life, the precious flame, was coming back.

And it did.

As Gula opened his eyes and looked blankly at Habba, his Habba, streams of tears running down her cheeks, the Doctor had the greatest difficulty in convincing the villagers that the devil had not entered the body. Still they persisted, "Gula is twice-born. Gula is a saint. Gula has returned from the clutches of Izrahil (Angel of Death)."

The Doctor was happily puffing at a cigarette but he only said, "Have it as you will but now remove the patient. Let me change my clothes."

"I shall take my man Gula to my father's home," declared Habba, between tears and ecstasy. "He will live with my parents."

A gloom fell on the Thana as the villagers swelled in a crowd outside, demanding release of the prisoners and the return of the fleeced blackmail.

The nervous sergeant released the prisoners, begging the agitators to keep quiet.

Most of the extorted blackmail filtered back.

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'Water–Thief'

The so-called Happy Valley of Kashmir was unhappy, very much so. Poor peasants, exploited and fleeced by the landlords and the revenue bureaucracy, deserted their good earth to find employment in the city of Srinagar, and many of them migrated to the plains in search of labour. Landlords, finding that they owned uncultivated tracts of land, for which they had to pay the irrevocable revenue taxes, out of their own pockets, also renounced their proprietary rights over the land. Acres of cultivable land lay waste over the darkening bosom of the Elysian Valley. These ugly patches swelled in size and, in the same proportion, the government land revenue fell, shaking the corrupt bureaucracy to its very foundation.

The Maharaja, a good and wise ruler, sat calm and majestic in his right oriental 'durbar,' smoking his grandiose *hookah*, fed by so many busy hands. Balancing his bulky turban, he looked out of his noble eyes at the inspiring countenance of the Settlement Commissioner, who said, "Maharaja Sahib, my settlement scheme has started. It will not only bring the peasants back to their land, but I shall also find a responsible proprietor for every inch of cultivable land." The Maharaja understood the brusque European with some difficulty. When he did so, he was delighted. The courtiers noisily expressed their applause as they marked His Highness permitting the shadow of a smile to cross his set lips.

What the Settlement Commissioner had said, he did, fetching admiration from every quarter. Where local people, still apprehensive whether they could pay the revenue after assuming the proprietorship of holdings, were not to be had, the Commissioner invited outsiders, resident in Kashmir, to take up the land. Many of them, out to make a fortune in Kashmir, readily availed themselves of these concessions.

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One of these adventurists was Amin Khan.He hailed from Peshawar, a tall, sturdy, sunburnt Pathan youth, who had run away from home due to political troubles. Travel to Kashmir and a fast life in Kashmir for about a year had almost beggared him. For next to nothing, he got a big tract of land near Naseem Bagh, one of the famous Moghul Gardens in Kashmir. This almost coincided with his employment in the police department of Srinagar as a head constable.

In those days even the far-away glimpse of the red turban of a policeman would frighten every Kashmiri. Peasants were coerced by the police to return to the deserted land if they would not do so willingly. Amin Khan's land was about seven miles from Srinagar. He, being the most feared of head constables of Srinagar, exploited his position and influence to have his land tenanted with occupancy peasants. He made them construct a cottage for him on the land in addition to the hovels that they raised for themselves. Amin Khan soon managed to have the full complement of peasants that his land demanded. The nearby village and hamlets, dotting the countryside, also sprung up into life as old peasants returned to the land or new peasants were procured to occupy them.

Years passed. Landlords started making profits out of their land. Peasants lived better lives. Their smiling green fields were a joy to see. They started reclaiming barren land. Landlords anxiously plotted with the corrupt Patwaris to obtain or to seize more land. Amin Khan, now risen to the post of a police inspector, multiplied his acreage tenfold by means fair or foul. After marrying a beautiful Kashmiri woman, he lived on his land in a bungalow-sort of a house. A canal ran through it and fed his vegetable garden and thence went to his surrounding paddy fields. Amin Khan rode his fine horse from the city to his country house. Pedestrians knew him and feared him. He hated them, these timid Kashmiris, one and all. His police investigation methods were well-known to be the most cruel and barbaric. His fierce look, his pointed, heavy moustache and his aggressive mien cowed every Kashmiri before him. They, poor Kashmiri peasants of the nearby village, whose lands were about to fall in his wily clutches, hated him for his greed for money and his avarice for land.

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It was a gay Kashmir summer. The paddy fields stretched far and wide around Amin Khan's country house. The view of the surrounding snowcapped mountains was a matter of pride to him. It was morning. He looked anxiously at the bright sun. No comforting speck of a cloud which might foretell rain, that the ripening paddy wanted in its last ripening stage, could be discerned by him.

Amin Khan shouted to a head peasant, "Razaka, come here". Razaka came, running, out of breath, for he feared the brutal kicks and heavy slaps of Amin Khan. To him he commanded, "Go, block the canal with a willow log where it goes to the village. The fields of those Kashmiri dogs don't want water. Let our fields have full water for two days. Then we will see whether we will leave the canal open to those village curs."

"But, sir...sir..." Razaka blurted.

Obviously, he wanted to say something but could not muster the necessary courage to do so. Amin Khan grew impatient and with a rap on his *hookah* pipe, he sent Razaka away, cowering. Stealthily, Razaka crept his apprehensive way to the canal where water was crudely measured through willow spans thrust across the thin line of water. He pushed the willow log to its place, blocking flow of water to the village.

At about noon, the water of the canal would swell due to melting of the snow on the mountains which fed the many streams. Then the peasants would hastily divert the water, dividing it carefully, according to established proportions, into their paddy holdings. On that day they were surprised to find no water coming to their holdings. The canal ran dry. Its muddy bed was cleft into crevices by the hot sun. What can it mean? Every peasant asked himself and asked others. They shouted to one another in protracted yells and they assembled, sweating, hollow-cheeked and mud-laden all over their ragged clothes, under a Chinar.

"What has happened to the water?" said one.

"Who has stolen our water?" raved another, and yet another.

A peasant came, running, taking short cuts through muddy paddy holdings, towards them, and said, making fierce gestures.

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"Look, there ! The Pathan's fields have water. The fields of that police wolf are full of water. He has stolen our water. Curse him!.."

His words were drowned as they cried: "Water-thief! Water - thief" "Kill him!" "Set fire to his house!" "Rape his fat wife!", and so on. They, all in a body, ran towards the house of Amin Khan. More peasants joined them, picking up shovels, sickles, lathis, brickbats, and whatever else came handy. Even women, without wiping the mud from their legs, and dirty-faced children joined them. Reaching Amin Khan's house, they broke open the gate and crowded into the court-yard.

"Kill the Pathan" "Burn his house!" "Water-thief! Water-thief!" etc., rose the deafening slogans. Amin Khan ran to the verandah. He could not at once understand why the rabble attacked his house. Realising the nature of the situation, he ran in and came out, grabbing his rifle. The mob had advanced near the house. Brickbats were freely thrown at the house. Amin Khan ducked his neck—to save himself. He shouted to the mob at the top of his voice, asking the reason. He caught the words "Water-thief!" from among the babble of Kashmiri that he could catch. Then he understood. He flew into a rage and cried, "You bastards! You be damned! " Why do you come here like this? Whose water? I am not water-thief! It is none of your business. I can block my canal." A shower of missiles greeted him in response. "Burn his house.. He is the Water-thief! May God kill him with a thunderbolt....." came the fiery voices of the angry mob that pressed close to the house. They were now breaking against the doors and windows of the first floor. Amin Khan aimed his rifle at a ring-leader of the rabble, shouting fiercely, "You sons of curs! Will you go away or I kill you all?.." But Amin Khan did not do so, as he simultaneously heard the shrieks of his wife, sobbing aloud. "My children are out in the garden!Allah save them!" The thought of the safety of his children utterly demoralised Amin Khan. His Pathan blood cooled in his veins. He left his rifle on the verandah and rushed downstairs to face the fury of the mob.

Strangely enough, the mob was calmed at Amin Khan's appearance. The peasant's dread of the police somehow persisted. They shouted all the same "Water-thief! Give us water."

Amin Khan, exasperated and fuming at the mouth, said, almost appealingly, "You will have water," and added, calling his servant,

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"Razaka, where are you? Go, divert the water of the canal to the village."

At this the mob was instantly pacified. Voices came, as dazed Amin Khan caught them, "May Allah save the Pathan! Come away to your fields.." While the mob melted, Amin Khan ran towards his children who had been so far hiding in a granary.

Several years passed. The peasants of the village were happy and contented. The crop promised a good harvest. The sun was about to set in the golden west behind the curving line of mountains. Peasants sat under the Chinar where they had one day assembled to fight the "Water-thief." The rustic *hookah* went round. The Grand Old Man, stroking his short hoary beard, looking towards Amin Khan's house, said, "There we go tonight. Know you, the Pathan has invited elders of the village to dinner at his house for this is the birthday of his eldest child." Saving this, he chuckled significantly and added, with a twinkle of his humorous eyes"The water-thief will no longer steal our water!"

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Told by Rahti

A Kashmir winter, cold, bleak and dreary, had set in. The Valley, shorn of its beauties and bereft of its singing birds, presented a dull spectacle. A spell of the warm sun drove me to Sahepura. The lovely stream flanking the village had almost dried up. The willow avenue leading on to it, the bared, bleak fields and the disinherited Chinar reinforced the loss of picturesqueness of the village to me as I cycled straight to the compound of Satara, our head farmer. A drowsy dog blinked at me. The newly-wedded daughter-in-law of Amira—another farmer—stared at me, as one of the daughters-in-law of Satara whispered my introduction to her, pausing at her rice-pounding. The Grand Dame, Satara's wife, sure came out and greeted me in her cordial matronly way, calling Sri Kanth, our servant at the farm.

After exchange of greetings, as I saw a woman standing near the door of the cottage, suckling her baby, I said to the dame, in my usual informal way, "Who is she there?"

"Don't you know her?" She questioned me back "She is Rahti. You honoured us by attending her marriage."

"Oh sure, I say, Rahti, when've you come here?" I said, excitedly, as pleasant memories of her marriage procession, and the fund of understanding those few days had given me of the rural life of Kashmir, rushed back to me. She walked slowly towards me and I marked that she was weaker, thinner. Why? Oh yes! the baby was suckling at her naked small breast. I grew familiar with her in the old way: "Excuse me, I did not recognise you. So, when have you come to your father's home?"

She remained silent for a while and then she broke the ice: "Two months back."

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The other women came nearer to us. My things were taken away by Sri Kanth—the urchins gaping at "the water horse",as they call the cycle in Kashmiri. I asked him to prepare tea for me, adding that I would follow him to our bungalow after some time.

Another child came up to Rahti calling her, "Mother." So she had two children. These peasants are very prolific, I thought. No doubt she had lost much of her colour. The child slipped away on some domestic errand. Rahti said, "You know my husband, Mahmdoo."

"Oh yes, yes," I agreed, vociferously. "I know Mahmdoo very well. I didn't see you these two years but I see him every time I come down here on a tonga. He paddles me to this village from the roadside in his *Shikara* boat. Oh! he is so jolly. I like him, I—"

"Listen, sir," she insisted. "two and a half months back, he, one day complained of an ache in the sides. We thought it was an ordinary pain and we did not notice it for a day or two. Next day he could not go to work because of the increasing trouble. We looked for the village headman who acts the *Hakim* here. He came, felt his pulse and said, 'It is a case of development of heat within the body.' He put him on boiled gravy. We tried that for a day or two. But the pain only increased. That alarmed us—."

"Did you not go to the town doctor?" I broke in. At the same time, I felt that it was no business of Rahti to impose an Ancient Mariner's tale of her husband's illness on me. But something compelling in her eyes and her sad mien made me stay and give patient ear to her.

"Then we thought of the town doctor," went on Rahti with her tale. "The town was three miles away. How could we remove Mahmdoo there? So I said to my mother-in-law that I would pawn my few ornaments for the doctor's fees and I did. My husband's brother went to fetch the doctor. No doctor came. He had gone to the City. Then we asked him to call in the Small Doctor who is as good as the Doctor."

I bit my lip as she mentioned the 'Small Doctor," who is no other than the compounder. 'Small Doctor' no doubt! The hopeless lack of medical aid in Kashmir villages, I brooded, dull the judgement of professional skill of the villagers. Farmers came up from the threshing-ground to greet me. I put them off. And Rahti, shifting her baby from one breast to the other, went on, after the women left for their

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work: "The Small Doctor wrote prescriptions just like a Doctor. He felt his pulse and put something in his mouth to mark his heat. He gave Mahmdoo medicines from the hospital and he came to visit him again and again, daily. Every time he left, he demanded his fee and the price of medicines. My father-in-law finished my money and then he borrowed more money on *Vadi*"— an exploiting contract with the village money-lender, whereby the peasant, during summer, pawns off coming harvest at ridiculously low rates.

The cow and sheep, followed by a boy, entered the compound and were tethered. Rahti's mother called her from inside the cottage but she shouted back that she was still talking to me. Cases of spoilation due to the inhuman system of *Vadi* rushed to my mind. Whole families were ruined by these cruel jews — the clever money-lenders. My interest in Rahti's tale grew. I must listen her out.

"The Small Doctor then said that the Big Doctor had come. My father-in-law then said, 'Earlier I could have called him here but now I'm almost finished with my money. We'll have to take Mahmdoo to the town hospital.' But the Small Doctor would not agree to that, saying that the patient's condition was not very good and that, if need be, he would pay the heavy fee from his own pocket. That moved my father-in-law but he was helpless. My father and brother came up in the nick of time. They sold off my brother's blanket. I wept as he came back with the money and then, anyway, the Big Doctor came. He felt uneasy in the darkened room where Mahmdoo lay, shouting and groaning, 'My Allah! Save me from this pain!' The Doctor showed us the large boil which had developed on the left side of Mahmdoo, just under the ribs. Oh! Allah, I sobbed silently."

Even as she said this, tears welled up in her small black eyes. The child by her side ran off to play with a lamb, white and fleecy beautiful thing. Looking about, I saw the sun heading towards the mountain-line, bearing eternal snows in its high lap. Loud guffaws reached us from the thrashing-ground. Rahti did not allude to that. Dryly, wiping her eyes, she went towards what seemed to be the climax of her story.

"The Big Doctor said before leaving, 'It is useless to treat the patient here. Take him to Srinagar hospital at once.' The Doctor left. Mahmdoo lighted up and said to us, 'Yes, take me to the Big City. There I shall not get these watery medicines. I'll be healed there, I am sure.' So we arranged men to row him up to Srinagar in our boat. When he

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left, he would not submit to being carried over to the boat. He walked himself against our protestations. I met him on the staircase and he said to me, 'Rahti, dear, I'll be back in a week. The City Doctor will surely cure me.' He cut a humorous joke with our neighbour as he took his seat on the grass bed—"

"Then was he cured all right?" She did not heed my question. Why?

"—in the open boat. My father-in-law and my brother went with him. The boat took them straight to the ghat of the Big City hospital next day. The Big City Doctor saw Mahmdoo and declared it to be a serious case. He rebuked my brother, 'You rustic fools! Why did you not get the patient here earlier?' My brother is modest and quiet. He did not tell him about our helplessness."

We were interrupted as Sri Kanth came up with *Samovar* (Kashmiri kettle), bearing strong Kashmiri tea for me. He insisted that I must take it or it would lose its flavour. So I sat down on the nearby rice-mortar, sipped the tea, while Rahti still stood by the cottage door, rooted to the ground. I felt that everything must have been right with Mahmdoo as he did get admitted in the Srinagar Civil Hospital. Let me listen to her conclusion over a cup of invigorating tea, that I needed so much after a long cycle trip.

The tea, Sri Kanth's tea, tasted sweet as she went on: "They put some medicine in his bowels and he had a motion. He felt very hungry and pleaded for rice like a child. The attendant told him that the card showed that only milk was to be given to him. My Great Allah! then, sir, know, what happened! My Mahmdoo died suddenly just after, while he had not even taken the milk!"

Died! I was shocked. I was not prepared for this at all. Tea tasted like gall and I threw it away. Sri Kanth, the old, affectionate servant, looked disdainfully at Rahti, for he understood that her rant made me spill the tea prepared by him with his usual pains. I would not listen to his protestations to have more tea. Rahti, tears streaming down her pale cheeks, philosophised, "They say the call of death can't be kept off. Don't you think, sir, Mahmdoo died an unnatural death? He wasn't to die yet. He was so young, so jolly. He has left me these children."

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Her child had come back and stood there, holding her hand. A leaf fell from the dried-up willow tree, slowly, uncertainly. I traced its downward fall to the earth. Somehow this confirmed in me that Mahmdoo was really dead. Dead—a martyr to lack of medical facilities in Kashmir villages. Mahmdoo, a sturdy, happy-go-lucky peasant, now a memory and a name! Somebody, I remembered a radio talk, said that there was one doctor to every thirty thousand Indians. Did they count "the Small Doctors" who medicate and kill with impunity?

The sun had sunk in the west by now. Clouds over the mountains had changed to heavy, dark, black masses. Farmers, giving the last touches to the threshed paddy, impatiently called me. I repaired towards the threshing-floor, thinking how much I could spare for the orphaned children of Rahti.

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The Confession

My knapsack appeared to have grown heavier as I laboured on over the endless fields.

"The village Kral is just there, beyond that field," gesticulated every peasant whom I asked the way. I crossed many a field and yet I never seemed to have traversed the "one field's distance" There was no sign of the elusive village.

The tattered rags worn by the peasants contrasted pathetically with the perfect beauty of the lush fields stretching far towards the wooded mountains of Kashmir, with snow glistening on their smooth shouldery tops. The red *pherans* of peasant women, comely belles... Oh, hang it! Kral, Kral, when would I reach there? I passed the orchard of Kauls, as the sign-board indicated. The roughly polite keeper directed me, while I admired his enormous build. Another field still, after so many, and, thank goodness, Kral was in sight.

My old acquaintance greeted me pompously. He perhaps saw the vegetable stems jutting out of my bag. He showed me to the single living-room of the cottage, which obviously endeavoured to look a proper house. The bag contained presents, half a seer of meat, city cakes, a paw of sugar, etc., over and above the vegetables, which I had calculated to pay my way as a 'P.G.'

"These are luxuries!" said Amar Chand, and he greedily conducted them to his dingy kitchenette.

The boy-servant came and started making tea, sugar tea, for I had brought sugar—a rare luxury in a mountain village. Later, I knew that

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the boy was one of forest watches under Amar Chand, who did odd jobs for him.

Easing my tired limbs, I sat near the window. The green hill was beautifully near.

"Why not go there over the promontory and have tea there?" I suggested.

"Yes, sure," mumbled Amar Chand, anxious to please me. I knew that he knew that I had influence in the City and that I attended the Durbar of His Highness!

Sooner said than done. The raised plateau commanded a most beautiful view of a tributary valley of Kashmir: willows, mulberries, Chinars sprinkled among the fields, waving in a typical summer breeze. Rows of young fruit trees in the orchards reminded me of Kauls' keeper, and I said to my companion, after we were seated on velvety turf under an ancient Chinar, "The keeper of Kauls' orchard was the last man to show me my way. He is a hefty shepherd of a keeper."

"Oh, he! *bett chod* that he is. I once beat him almost to death." Tea came. The 'servant' poured the hot refreshing liquid from the *samovar*. As we adjusted cups over our handkerchiefs, I said to Amar Chand, "Why did you beat him?" Of course, I knew that beating of poor villagers was something of an accepted right of a forest guard. Still, let me hear the details.

"It was like this," began Amar Chand over a hot sip. "One day I was having my usual noonday round in the forest where, well everybody knows, I am the master of all I survey. No one can cut a blade of grass or pick up a faggot or a dung-cake there without my express permission."

He coughed violently and grew more reminiscent. I thought of the many floggings and extortion of poor villagers by these parasitic, corrupt guards that I had witnessed from time to time. The picture of dense forests of Tosmarg flitted before my mind's eye when I, dressed in Khaki, galloping, on a mountain pony, frightened away a bevy of mountaineer girls who mistook me for a forest guard! The scared

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lovely birds did not even look back at me as I reined in, amused and yet pensive. The fond memory was disturbed as Amar Chand wiping his mustachios, whose fierce points must have been a terror to the poachers, went on:

"One of my watches was with me. We sat down to rest in a close glen. I said to him, rather pompously, 'Say, Salaama brother, does any bastard come over here to poach now? They know our anger and they're terrified.' Salaama agreed, saying, 'Sir, they are all afraid of you as they are of Izrahil (angel of Death)'. That flattered me. I was proud of my power. In a village, one who has ever so little of it, easily gets vain. Just then what happened?"

Amar Chand had an attack of cough as he grew excited. He spat and he drank off hastily, the last cold sips of the tea, and, throwing away the cup towards the watch, continued, "We heard a sound. We were alert at once. I thought a leopard was prowling on us and I calculated the distance that I would have to traverse to the nearest tree for safety. We waited, cautious and still more alert. Yet another rustle. My heart beat fast. The colour left Salaama's cheeks. What was my surprise, when, from a corner of the glen, I saw a man, trying to conceal himself behind a bush."

Here, I interrupted, for I wanted yet another cup of tea from the steaming *samovar*. The watch poured it. I thanked him in the usual formal words. Amar Chand looked at me as if I had stung him. His eyes seemed to say, "Don't degrade yourself to thank a mere *chaprasi*." Aloud he said, "Shall I go on?" My curiosity was thoroughly aroused now. Tea was aiding me to like his tale! At the same time, I enjoyed the panoramic sunset casting a weird spell over the western sky and bathing the eastern snow-capped peaks in the last golden rays that would play for some glorious time over hill and dale and then be gone for ever, gone for ever. But a thing of beauty is a joy for ever. After a few dreamy moments, I said to the anxious narrator, "Pandit Sahib, pray go on. Was it a poacher?"

"Oh sure ! None else but a poacher. My blood boiled to see that a villager had taken it in his head to defy and flout me. I rushed towards my prey. He ran but he tremblingly fell down on the ground. I was over him in a moment, with Salaama at my heels. At once I started beating the fellow, his face downwards. It was belabouring, downright tor-

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ture. Salaama helped me with a prickly stick which he cut out of a conifer and I set to flog the unfortunate fellow. He whimpered, groaned, wept dry tears. In my fury I recognised it was Mahmdoo, Kauls' orchard-keeper and though I knew Kauls and they, you know, tip me and feast me whenever they come to their orchard, I wasn't moved by Mahmdoo's appeals for mercy. He deserved it, he must have it. My hands were tired. So I used my legs, then my hands again. The stick was broken. Salaama, knowing that I would need another, had already fetched it. I thrashed Mahmdoo so long as I could.

"He lay there, half conscious, hardly groaning. The small bundle of faggots he had collected was by his side. I scattered them in indignation. Then Salaama said, 'Pandit Sahib, you are panting now. Your cough will attack you. Let the fellow go to hell.' So it did. I coughed violently as we left him there and proceeded towards the village. I said to Salaama, 'Mahmdoo must have been trying the usual Kashmiri peasant's feint'. He agreed."

Amar Chand heaved a sigh. Why? Did a forest guard, callous and hardened, still retain a soft heart? Wasn't his conscience, the still small voice within, utterly trodden out by his way of life corruption, rahe of defenceless women whom — he must have caught poaching, his inhuman cruelty in punishing the poor folk..?

Kites returned to their high lofts over the Chinar. The sunset flame vanished.

Regaining his poise, he continued sheepishly, "Well, I am a Pandit after all though my profession has made me rather hard. Going down the forest path, I brooded. What had I done? I reproached myself. May be, Mahmdoo is dying there. No, I must know that he is not. Impulsively, I said to Salaama, 'Go to Mahmdoo. Fetch him to this place and let me know.' Salaama went back, surprised and reluctant.

"Well, you should know, I left Salaama at the risk of my life. I was passing by a thick forest slope where leopards, panthers and bears came down to the brook to drink water. I prayed to God for myself, and, believe me, for Mahmdoo too.

"Late in the evening, Salaama came to me with a report of his work. Mahmdoo had fainted for a long time. He was in bed, shivering with fever. There were no faggots to light the fire with. I sent Salaama

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back to Mahmdoo's hut with the instructions, 'Take faggots for his hearth fire. Make tea for him, as you say, that his wife is away. But don't you tell him that I sent you.' You see I had to keep my *izzat* that way.

"Mahmdoo was confined to bed for a week. Believe me, that one week was full of agony for me. My hardened heart did soften after all. All my past cruelties came to my mind. I had been unlike a non-violent Kashmiri Pandit who does not even harm a fly or an ant. I must give up all this and I did. But Mahmdoo's condition, of which I had hourly reports, concerned me. I was a morbid kind of fellow, I reproached myself. His groans and his cries of pain resounded in my ears, giving me no mental rest. I slept but little. It is strange how a small incident can bring about such a change in a man's life. At any rate, this one changed the course of my life, Believe me from that day, I don't even whip my pony even when the poor thing grows stubborn."

He stopped for breath. The effort of unburdening his heart to a confidant eased him, but it perspired his forehead and beads of sweat hung about his nose. He did not wipe them. He raced ahead, "Mahmdoo did recover but not I. What I had done to him weighed heavily on my mind. I must make amends. I must repent. And, in a strange way, God ordained it that I made amends. Know you, so far, I have not told anyone all this.

"It was winter. Snow had mantled the wood and the village. We could hardly stir out. Birds clung to the freezing boughs and even so, we closeted ourselves. My Pandit watch, who gave us tea just now, told me that there was no firewood in the kitchen. My *kangri* was already cold. Something had to be done about it. I asked Salaama to follow me and we waded over the yielding, soft snow, one foot deep, towards the forest. Reaching its fringe, we found the snow deeper there. It would be a folly to go up to the forest for fire-wood. So we retreated along a longer path, counting that dried-up mulberry trees would fall in the way.

"We came upon Kauls' orchard where Mahmdoo was the keeper. Why not fell a young apple tree? That would be easy enough. I beckoned one to Salaama and ordered him, 'Proceed with your axe.' He protested, 'Mahmdoo may come. He is a strict keeper.' Derisively I replied, 'What then?'

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"The tree was cut down. As Salaama was about to carry it on his shoulder, we saw a form, clearly outlined over smooth snow, approaching towards us from the keeper's hut. Could it be Mahmdoo? We at once retreated towards a wide rut serving as fence on one side of the orchard. There we hid ourselves. I covered my face with my muffler and Salaama covered his with his *chaddar*. But it was no use.

"Mahmdoo shouted, 'I have caught you, you *badmashes*,' as he neared us. He greeted us with his heavy fists and heavier kicks. I muffled my face closer silently receiving heavy blows. He recognised Salaama and Salaama begged his pardon. He was moved and stopped beating us.

" 'Who is this other thief?' asked Mahmdoo.

" 'Oh! he is Amar Chand's relative from his native village,' quickly replied Salaama.

" 'Is he? Tell Amar Chand I've forgiven his thieving relative and that I'm not taking him to the police.' "

Amar Chand was visibly moved when he recounted this noble remark of Mahmdoo.

As we rose up to go to his residence, the confessor added, "You see, it was just good luck that he didn't recognise me. Nor does he know yet, thanks to Salaama. But he has taught me the lesson of my life."

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Bear Stories of Kashmir

The bear is the largest beast of prey in the Northern Hemisphere. Its length is between 5 and 7 feet. Its clumsy shoulders stand more than 3 feet from the ground.

The bear is a veritable terror of the Kashmir forests and uplands. The shy panther, the fierce leopard, the wild boar, the savage wolf and other beasts of prey of Kashmir are not so much feared as this uncouth-looking brute, who not only kills men and cattle but causes havoc to maize fields and fruit trees and honey stores.

The writer has collected a number of bear stories from life, some of which shall be briefly narrated here.

A Heroic Woman

Strange as it may appear, a woman saved not only herself, but her husband and her child from the clutches of a bear. Dr. G.L. Kaula, Medical Officer, Pahalgam, who treated this woman and her husband in the hospital in the summer, of 1945, told me the thrilling story of this rustic heroine, named Fati.

Fati was going to attend a feast in a nearby village in the company of her husband. She was carrying her only child, a daughter in her arms and a bag, containing some maize as presents for the hosts on her back.

The 'maize-lover', the bear, tracked them down in the forest. It was just nightfall. They saw the bear approaching them. They did not even carry an axe for that did not look proper when one went to dine out.

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The bear attacked the man, Fati's man, and bit his arm with which he tried to shield himself. Fati shrieked. The bear left him to attack her. In the twinkling of an eye she threw off her child, to one side, away from the bear, and took up a big log of wood that lay nearby. With this she dealt the bear a thumping blow on his snout. But that was after the brute hit her on her left collar bone. The crashing blow, however, scared off the bear who, carrying the bag of maize that lay near him, fled away.

There was a regular 'pilgrimage' of visitors at Pahalgam to the hospital to see this brave woman. Many a kind lady gave her presents.

Bear grubs Picnic

A party of hikers were having a picnic in an upland meadow at Gulmarg. They had just spread out their eatables when they saw a huge bear on top of a small sloping mound under whose base they were squatting in a circle.

"Bear! Bear!" was the sudden cry. The frightened hikers broke in all directions taking cover under rocks or behind pine trees, or, simply running away without looking back. Those of them that took cover somewhere near and peeped at the uninvited guest, saw a strange sight, grim, awe-striking yet funny. The bear rolled himself down and stopped almost exactly at the place where the untouched picnic was laid. Sitting on his haunches—a harrowing figure to behold—he helped himself with the sweets, the bread, the fruits, with his forelegs, spilling a thermos and jumping to one side when the hot tea gurgled out. Having eaten most of the booty the bear ran back on all fours. The awe-struck hikers hardly believed their eyes, when the brute, though depriving them of refreshments that they wanted so badly, was lost in the jungle.

Bear, the Maize-Looter

Bears are carnivorous but not strictly so. They are indeed omnivorous. The black bear, that is found more in Kashmir than the brown bear, eats not only honey, berries and other fruits of the forest, but roots also and chews them to a pulp. He is very fond of maize and sometimes ravages. whole fields. To protect their maize-fields from the fierce denizen of the nearby forests, the peasants raise high lofts on willow poles and keep watch there for whole nights.

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Habiba, our farmer, goes to forest every summer in the company of other villagers after they have already sent their sheep and goats in charge of mountain shepherds. They go there to look up their chattels and carry salt for them, with which they feed them. They do so themselves in consequence of traditional distrust of the shepherds. In these annual visits to the forests, his party would halt for the night at a village where he came to be acquainted with the Nambardar, a tall hefty, broad-shouldered typical Gujar wearing a big *pugree*.

Last time, when he met the Gujar Nambardar after a year, he saw that his *pugree* was leaning towards left side on his head, covering his ear and eye on the side. After exchanging *salaams*, he asked him, pointing to his *pugree*, "Why is your *pugree* like that, Ramzan Khan?"

In reply, Ramzan Khan took off his *pugree*, revealing distorted temples, a cut ear, a ghastly-looking, disfigured, blind eye with no traces of eyelashes and surrounded by deep scars. He said simply "The work of a bear."

After some time, he added, "Thank Allah, I killed the bear after a hard contest in the night. He ravaged my maize-fields. I searched him everywhere in the day, but would not catch him. What blows I gave him with my axe"—he proudly produced his axe from under his rustic belt—" "and he, the rascal, tried to snatch it from me. In so doing his blows did to my face what you have seen. But my blows felled him, thank Allah! Will you see his hide? It hangs in my room. I did not give it to the Shikari even for a good price. It is my trophy!"

A Plucky Gujar

Habiba also related to me the story of another still more heroic Gujar who had a hand-to-hand duel with a bear.

The Gujar had gone to pay a visit to a friend in a nearby village. Returning late, he had to cross a fringe of the forest. It was full moon. At a turning towards the thicker part of the forest, he espied a stout-looking 'man' coming towards him in the distance. The 'man's gait was extremely awkward. He appeared to be madly flinging his arms towards right and left.

Soon, when the huge figure neared him, he realised with a shock that it was a bear walking on its hind legs. He prepared for the duel,

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wrapping his woollen blanket round his right arm and hand, and clutching its ends hard within his hand. The bear leaped towards him aiming blows at him. The Gujar, protecting himself behind a tree, avoided them dexterously, keeping his right hand ready. Then the bear, exasperated, as his blows hardly touched the Gujar, opened his mouth wide and came to bite him.

In the nick of time, the plucky Gujar thrust his blanket-covered arm right into the wide-open mouth of the bear. The bear fiercely struggled to free himself but the sturdy Gujar choked him dead on the spot. The brave Gujar did not incur a single physical injury as a result of this combat. But, Habiba related to me, in pathetic tones, how this poor hero had a terrible mental shock. He was not quite normal mentally after this encounter and he died only in a month's time.

The Lover of Woman

Strange but true tales of women being carried away by bears are current in every rural home. The bear has a fancy for women wearing red *pherans* or cloaks.

Here is a story related to me by Rajaba, our servant, who comes from a village in the vicinity of the Wular Lake — the biggest fresh water lake of India. Dramatising the story with simple, natural gestures, accompanying the story with simple, natural gestures, enlivened by relevant rise and fall in his tone, he said, "The wife of Satara, our neighbour, had gone to the wood to cut wood and to collect dung. She saw a big bear. She screamed and tried to run away. Somehow she felt as if she was rooted to the ground.

"The bear came alongside her. She was expecting a shower of stunning blows but none came. Instead, the bear, standing on his hind legs, fondled her red-coloured *pheran* with his paws. To her horror, the bear took her and carried her up the mountain. His claws pierced her body and she shrieked with pain and terror, but it was of no avail.

"At a steep ascent, the bear caught hold of the lappets of her *pheran* and made her follow him to his den, whose mouth he shut with a big stone. She felt stifled in the dungeon as it smelt very stinky. She failed to remove the stone.

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"Soon, the bear returned with a heap of apricots and placed them near her. Next day he led her out of the den and made her sit in front of it. The apricots were still there.

"She ate them to her full. The bear, in an unchivalrous way, lifted her *kasaba* (a rustic circular head-dress held tight with pins and carrying a bonnet that hangs on the back and cover the pendant tresses). He began to play with it in a clumsy, boyish way. While he was so engaged, the *kasaba* rolled down a nearby gorge. Thither the bear followed his toy. Taking her golden opportunity, the captive woman fled in another direction and soon reached her home where she was already being mourned!"

'Apricot-Bear'

Rajaba could not resist the temptation of narrating to me a personal adventure with a bear: "You know, sir, I was a cattle-herd before I joined your service. I used to carry cattle far up in the woods from my village. It was the 'apricot-ripening' season. One day, on my way back, when my flock was going before me, I heard the sound of crashing of branches on an apricot tree. I could not see who was enjoying the ripe apricots.

"I shouted up, 'Hallo! you fellow, why do you cut branches like that? Will you throw a few apricots down here?' I had hardly finished saying this when the cattle clustered round me. They pricked up their ears. Their eyes signified terror. I understood the cause as I located a bear within the branches, eating apricots, most of which he was throwing down. My heart sank within me"—here Rajaba indeed looked pale at the reminiscence of his horror—"I sank down and squatted on my haunches, concealing myself within the herd. The cattle pushed closer to me all around. I thought I was safe enough as, at the very worst, the bear would kill some of the cattle round. I peeped through them and saw the bear climb down on the earth. He collected the apricots*, ate them and, to my great relief, giving us a short, scornful look, he made off in the opposite direction."

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* Kashmiris name bears after their depredatory, omnivorous nature. Bears are called "apricot-bears", "maize-bears", "mulberry-bears", and so on.

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Ravages of a She-bear

A bear in the midst of a maize-field is a sight to see. He uproots as much maize as a sheaf at a time, then sits on his haunches and starts greedily devouring the maize. Many unwary peasants, harvesting the maize singly, are killed by bears hiding among the maize.

The bear usually attacks by giving terrible strokes with his front paws to the head and cheeks of his human victim. The blows from the paws, furnished with strong, curved claws, succeed one another in quick succession, stunning the victim. Or, the bear may seize his antagonist in arms and squeeze life out of him. Therefore, peasants, working in maize-fields haunted by bears work in groups, because a bear does not usually dare attack a group of men, unless it is a she-bear with her team of whelps, or, if she has just waked from long winter fast.

I was told how last summer a she-bear worked havoc to a village, Ashum, near Ganderbal. She would molest and kill human beings even during the day. She and her whelps devastated many maize fields and killed many cattle during nights; and, during the day, would lie hidden somewhere among them. Peasant parties could not locate her during the day. but during the night they—even in a group—did not and would not dare to attack her with axe or *lathi*, when she and her progeny were spoiling their maize-fields. They had no gun in the village. Eventually, a hunter's services had to be requisitioned through the government to do away with the pest. Till then this nightmare of a she-bear was a haunting terror to the villagers.

Many cattle were killed and eaten by the she-bear. Three peasants, including one woman, were killed. The woman, running for her life, slipped into a well and died therein. The she-bear, running after her, did not fall into the well, but she was chased by the villagers and the hunter, who killed her after a desperate fight. Even with several balls inside her, the she-bear rushed at the hunter whose life was narrowly saved, as a peasant's axe felled the beast's head. The whelps were then easily disposed of.

Indeed, from times immemorial, the she-bear has been held to be

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a thing of terror. In the Scriptures the she-bear deprived of its young stands as a simile: "Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man rather than a fool in his folly." The instinctive maternal devotion of a she-bear is prodigious, especially after the period of hibernation when she gives birth to her young. She attacks anybody even when she entertains the least apprehension of harm to her young.

The bear-fighting Faqir

A so-called *Faqir* and his *Chela*—disciple—made a good livelihood by playing upon the superstitions of the peasantry in a village, Tral. Maize fields having been ravaged by a she-bear, the peasants in a body betook themselves to the *Faqir's* hovel, saying, with profound obeisances, "*Salaam*, O great one, free us from this infernal pest that has laid bare so many of our rich fields."

The revered *Faqir*, stroking his hoary beard, raised his index finger, and said, "Do not fear, trust in Allah. Our *chella* will see to this. Armed with only one of our spells, he will drag the bear by the ears before you. He will do so tonight; happily the moon is full." Their joy knew no bounds. They wished him long life and said among themselves: "Sheikh Sahib is really a man of God.. he once killed a leopard with a mere blow of his stick.. he has great supernatural powers.. Don't you know he never sleeps!" And others, not to be outdone: "His *chella* is also great..He will indeed terrify the bear.." And so on.

The gossip flattered the vanity of the *Faqir* and, more so, that of his Chela. He instructed the peasants to leave the *chella* alone when he would go on his dangerous mission, for the recitation of the deadly spells needed absolute silence.

Accordingly, the *chella* set out in the dead of night to kill the doomed brute. He was armed only with a *lathi*. The she-bear was already there. Her whelps were away from her, frolicking and frisking like lambs. She was busy collecting maize from harvested plants. The *chella*, reciting the sacred spells, went towards the she-bear and gave her a blow on her head.

The ferocious brute retaliated wildly. Getting up on her hind-legs, she savagely clawed his face with her fore-paws. He gave her one more blow on her snarling lips. She struck him several times on his face. The villagers, watching this encounter from an ambush, snatched the

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precious time to attack the whelps, who were two in number, one of which was killed by them on the spot. Hearing the cries of her whelps, the bear left her assailant to defend her young.

The clever attackers had already fled to cover against a big Chinar. The she-bear whined over her dead whelp for some time and then carried the corpse on her back and went towards the wood with her other whelp.

The villagers gave a hell to the *chella* and even to the *Faqir*. Their superstitious belief in their powers changed to fierce ridicule bordering on hatred, so that, feeling themselves not very safe, the *Faqir* and the badly disfigured *chella* had to pack up and leave the village. The night-reception given to the quixotic *chella*, on his return from his still-born expedition, was and is still and standing joke of the village.

Old Man's Advice

Old mountaineers, experienced in bear-fighting will, round a fire, give tips to their inexperienced youngsters "Never go alone to a thick forest or to a maize-field. Always carry your axe."

Stroking his long, white beard, leaving the *hookab* aside, the grand old man of the village produces his own axe to authenticate his exhortations and continues in the simple, rustic manner of easy talk. "Look at my axe; it has killed five bears. Allah was ever on my side. I always prayed to God whenever I encountered a bear.

"You, dear boys, should know how to dodge a bear when you meet one in the forest. He will come to give you blows with his outstretched arms. Praying to God for His protection and, repeating His Holy name, hide behind a nearby tree. Be quick for the bear's blows will be short and strong. When he attempts a blow, dodge it. Dodge his blows so many times that his front paws ache. He will show it. Then take your chance with your axe or your steel-glove."

Here the proud old man demonstrates his steel-glove* adding with slight humility, that it has accounted for one bear. While the

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* The steel-glove is worn over right-hand and arm. Its spikes, skilfully manipulated by the finger, clutch the bear in the neck. It is specially used by hunters who mean to catch bear-cubs alive with a view to taming them. Many a *Tamasha-bear* occasionally make their appearance in city and town, entertaining the people with their 'dances'. But the tamer has to be very wary against the precarious temper of the bear.

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potential bear-fighters look at the glove, admiringly, the old man continues: "Be wary with the steel-glove. Its use demands great proficiency, nerve and strength. I used it but once. In any case, trust and pray to God and never lose heart. The bear is indeed afraid of you and your faithful axe. Use your axe at the right time to fell the brute's skull."

Is he Dead?

Many a hill-man confronted with a bear play the time-old trick of feigning to be dead. The story that I heard has a touch of the macabre about it.

A man was walking in the night over a mountain graveyard. In the starlight, aided by the light of the quarter-moon, he saw a huge form coming towards him. "The devil has come to kill me!" thought the harrowed, superstitious mountaineer. Soon he made out that it was a bear walking on his hind legs and carrying a human corpse on his ample shoulders. Fear gave way to alert commonsense.

The plucky mountaineer quietly lay flat, pretending to be just another corpse. The bear, throwing down his load, came towards him and 'examined' him. He pushed him sideways. Then he, as it were, felt his chest and pulse. Feeling sure that it was just another burdensome corpse, the bear lifted up the terror-stricken fellow and threw him down in the hole from where he had extracted the corpse that he was carrying. He then thinly covered him with earth.

Tolerating the foulsome stink for some reasonable time, the supposed 'corpse' moved out of the grave to confound the villagers with his harrowing experience.

Modern Androcles

A wood-sawyer's experiences with a bear reminded me of the legendary Androcles and the Lion. It was in Vachi that I heard the story from a 'know-all' Patwari, who assured me that he had known the wood-sawyer.

The wood-sawyer sawed wood for the Zaildar's house near a maize-field. He was the only wood-sawyer of the village. He would go to his work early in the morning and would stop only at nightfall.

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One day when he went to his work, he was startled to see a bear on top of the slanting log which he had sawn only half its length. He was so much struck with fear that he could not even flee for his life. Rooted to the ground, he was amazed to find that the bear did not climb down but kept on sitting in the same straddling posture. The bear beckoned to him—however clumsily.

The wood-sawyer's horror lessened. His fear was changed to amusement when he noted that the bear had fussily removed the wedge, and that, in so doing, one of his forelegs had got stuck up fast between the two half-sawn partitions. The bear—he now understood—made imploring gestures to him to be freed.

The wood-sawyer was on the horns of a dilemma. Should he release the brute and invite death at his hands? Should he leave him like that and earn the disapprobation of his stern employee? A God-fearing man that he was, he resolved to free the bear. He put in the wedge and the bear's foreleg was freed. The bear almost caressed him and then ran off among the maize-fields.

At about evening that day, when the wood-sawyer was about to stop work, the bear made his appearance, frightening the tired wood-sawyer. But he did not harm him. He followed him home. The Patwari assured me that the bear would sleep outside his hut every summer night, and that he would, off and on, share his spoils — a honey comb, apricots, maize, etc. — with him, thus amply repaying a debt of honour.

In conclusion, let us give some credit to the bear of Kashmir. His skin is put to so many well-known uses. His fat is used by the Kashmiris as an essential ingredient of many drugs. Like wine, its fat is meticulously preserved through generations. The older the fat, the more efficacious it is supposed to be.

Many treasured amulets worn by the rural children contain his hair. Villagers give short though terrifying rides to their children on black *Tamasha*-bears as an effective antidote against the evil eye! So the bear, in spite of his depredations, has his extenuating points.

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Leopard Stories of Kashmir

The Happy Valley of Kashmir is not dwelt in by the fierce tiger or the ferocious lion. It abounds in bears and there are also many leopards. Panthers are found here and there. Both the leopard and the panther are known as 'suh' or 'shair' to the Kashmiri. Except the gypsy tribes and Gujar shepherds, the average Kashmiri is not sports-minded nor does he encounter the leopard so often as the vandalistic bear.

The first impulse of a typical Kashmiri is to respect the 'shair,—for he does not know how to distinguish between the manly leopard and the feminine panther. A veteran Shikari—of course, a Kashmiri, one of those local hunters whose services are indispensable to the visitor-sportsman—once told me, when I asked him the distinctive features of the leopard and a panther, "Leopard is masculine and he is bolder and bigger in size than the panther. The panther is a thief." He meant that the panther prowls more. The panther not unusually hides cunningly in ruts, crevices and behind bushes. Not so the leopard, whose range of roaming can be extensive, and who, therefore, provides better sport to the keen sportsman—and, incidentally, stories to the people.

PLUCKY ENGLISH HUNTER

Major Smith was one of those many retired English officials who take a fancy to Kashmir and spend the rest of their days in the "Eden of the East." Hunting was more than his hobby. It was his dominant passion. For most part of the year, as and when the weather allowed, he was a-hunting in Kashmir forests.

Learning the use of the steel glove, which is worn on the left hand and thrust in the neck of the leopard, the bear or other game in a close

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Leopard Stories of Kashmir

The Happy Valley of Kashmir is not dwelt in by the fierce tiger or the ferocious lion. It abounds in bears and there are also many leopards. Panthers are found here and there. Both the leopard and the panther are known as 'suh' or 'shair' to the Kashmiri. Except the gypsy tribes and Gujar shepherds, the average Kashmiri is not sports-minded nor does he encounter the leopard so often as the vandalistic bear.

The first impulse of a typical Kashmiri is to respect the 'shair,—for he does not know how to distinguish between the manly leopard and the feminine panther. A veteran Shikari—of course, a Kashmiri, one of those local hunters whose services are indispensable to the visitor-sportsman—once told me, when I asked him the distinctive features of the leopard and a panther, "Leopard is masculine and he is bolder and bigger in size than the panther. The panther is a thief." He meant that the panther prowls more. The panther not unusually hides cunningly in ruts, crevices and behind bushes. Not so the leopard, whose range of roaming can be extensive, and who, therefore, provides better sport to the keen sportsman—and, incidentally, stories to the people.

PLUCKY ENGLISH HUNTER

Major Smith was one of those many retired English officials who take a fancy to Kashmir and spend the rest of their days in the "Eden of the East." Hunting was more than his hobby. It was his dominant passion. For most part of the year, as and when the weather allowed, he was a-hunting in Kashmir forests.

Learning the use of the steel glove, which is worn on the left hand and thrust in the neck of the leopard, the bear or other game in a close

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grappling duel, he became extremely proficient with it. Of bears, leopards and panthers, he had more than ten heads to his personal credit—proudly decorating his drawing room—and all of them, he, with incredible luck, had victimised with the deadly use of the steel glove. The old Kashmiri hunter, who told me about the Major's exploits, said, "The Major Sahib had such luck and such daring which I have not seen any *Vilayati* to have, so far in my long life."

But the hunter also added, "Now listen, Pandit Sahib. We were three hunters with the Major Sahib in a forest where leopards abounded like hares! It was the crack of dawn and we were a-hunting already. We reached a precipitous top. The patch of flat ground, covered with pines, on which we stood, overlooked a majestic valley and a giddying ravine edged away from us.

"A leopard appeared. It was obviously a ferocious she-leopard. She jumped and capered and growled as she espied us. We, the hunters, spread out with fixed bayonets leaving a passage for the leopard to pass so that she would leap upon the Major Sahib, who was ready with his steel glove and *kakri*. This was our usual tactics. The leopard first came upon me but I did not fire because I would not spoil the sport of the Major Sahib. Anyhow the leopard did not leap at me but, emitting a thundering roar, she went straight at the Major Sahib.

"The Major Sahib—O, save me, Allah !—fell down and the leopard was on him; still we did not fire at the brute for his orders were express that we should never interfere with his hand-to-hand duels even if he were wounded badly.

"And then, you know, even if I did fire, I might have killed the Major Sahib. With superhuman strength, the Major Sahib, shading his face with the glove, extricated himself from the paws of the leopard. But his shoulder and his leg were bleeding over the torn clothes. It was a terrible sight seeing him like that.

"In the twinkling of an eye, the Major Sahib made a fierce gesture at us to keep away while he pierced both the steel spikes of the glove and the *kakri* into the neck of the leopard who gave out a whining roar. My Allah! Allah is great and Allah is one!—it was a hell to look at seeing the Major Sahib and the leopard bleeding, profusely. All his earlier duels had been more or less clean affairs and that was why we called him the 'Miracle Hunter.' He would use the glove and the *kakri*

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only to give a stunning fall to his prey and then, lest the beast stand up again, he would fire at it from close range and end the life out of the game. But this time it was a hell for both, the Major Sahib and the leopard.

"Standing like that, they fell and rolled together on the ground. The Major Sahib again tried to extricate himself, but this time, my Allah, I saw to my horror, for I loved the kind Major Sahib, that the forepaw of the leopard was clenched on his face and in his very mouth. Terrible bleeding. The leopard's back was towards me. I fired at it.

"The two still rolled and rolled, till they reached the edge of the precipice. We ran and tried all together to hold the hands and legs of the Major Sahib and hold him back. We tried all our strength. It was in vain. The leopard and the Major Sahib rolled over the edge and down the precipice and I, with everything swimming before my eyes, felt the earth flying before me in a dazed moment. My Great Allah !"

The hunter took a pause here. He prayed with outstretched hands, saying something in Arabic, in which I could make out the name of the Major Sahib. The effort of the harrowing reminiscence overpowered him and I also felt tears coming to my eyes. I checked them and stared at the furrowed, hollowed face of the hunter, which was blanched for a moment. Making an obvious effort, he went on:

"Afterwards I was told by my hunter-companions that I half fell over the leopard and the Major Sahib but they, thanks to Allah my preserver, caught me by the lappets of my coat and my belt and saved me from falling. They said that the sight of the shrieking Major Sahib and the low growls of the dying leopard as they fell, quicker and quicker, over the boulders and rocks for, as it were, miles together, was the most ghastly they had ever seen. They believed that both of them were dead before they reached the distant bottom of the ravine where they must have fallen in some inaccessible fissure, I was told, when I came to senses after about one hour. When I knew what had happened to my dear master, I wasn't myself for days together, when the police, the military *afsar* and the Tehsildar and *Angrezi afsar* log and the police took our statements."

The narrative moved me. Tears visibly beaded the hunter's eyes. I thought of those summer tourists who dub Kashmiris as faithless, unreliable, liars and so on !

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I GREET A LEOPARD

Years back, when I was a student, I used to get disgusted with the too long winter vacation that our college gave us. Daily long walks, even in the severest weather, helped to kill the ennuni born of too much leisure. Brij Nath and I would buckle up our warm coats, wrap our mufflers close, feeling warm in gloves and woollen socks, we would trot out for the day. A convention was that the condition of the weather would not affect this daily strenuous programme to which we had pledged ourselves! Another was that every day we must repair to a different destination, however far that might be.

The turn of Shankaracharya Hill came. It had snowed during the night, but not much. As we ascended the slushy path, it grew treacherous.

Brij Nath, timorous as ever, objected, "How can we reach the top when the path is so slippery?" I made no reply but trudged on. Then he added, correcting himself, "We'll reach the hell of a temple all right. But we can't come down." I laughed at his blasphemy for it was the first time I heard him decrying a temple—a sacred and ancient temple as that.

Merrily, I replied, resourcefully, "I shall find you a stick. Everything will be all right. Now buck up, for, I tell you, the Valley of Kashmir looks glorious when it wears the snow-mantle."

Srinagar and its suburbs did look grand. The thinned, sinuous Jhelum was a snake creeping over the soft, heaving bosom of the Valley. The densely packed city was buried under the snow. The arms and the main part of the Dal Lake looked themselves islands in a sea of snow, that bathed the overhanging mountains. As we perched on a cold rock on one side of the temple, the snow-draped deodars were modest brides to my adolescent imagination. We talked about everything and nothing in particular.

I was lost in contemplation of the sheety Gagribal Lake, sensitively reflecting the passing mists. Brij Nath startled me with, "There is a big cat! A big cat!" Just below, about half a furlong down, silhouetted on the hillside, sloping away from us, I saw the big bushy-tail of a restless form. Was it a jackal, I thought? The animal turned right about and I saw the big head, the very proud whiskers and then,

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I saw the densely spotted body, brown and black dots playing on an excellent fur. All in a breathless moment.

I shouted to Brij Nath, in the greatest excitement, "It's a leopard! Stand up! Away!" Foolishly, he persisted, for he had never seen one, "It is a big cat, I am sure." I locked my hands in his and pushed him, giving a last apprehensive look at the leopard who still looked towards the opposite mountain. We ran for our life and climbed the long, tiring flight of ancient stone staircase to the temple. Thank God, the *pujari* was there. He confirmed that it was a leopard, for only on the previous day he had seen one. He also said, pointing towards the huge Siva idol, water trickling over its smooth sides, "If God saves one, who can kill him?"

TWO RED EYES IN THE DARK

I was still panting. When we sort of felt normal, my usual curiosity overcame me and I said to the *pujari*, after he had bathed the Siva idol, wiped its shining sides clean and besmeared it with saffron paste, "Where did you meet the leopard?"

"Oh ! that, don't be anxious to know that," he, true to his holy salt, started a kindly sermon (on the Shankaracharya Mount !), which was, of course, in tune with our pristine surroundings. "But remember, boys, a *shair* is a devotee of God. He is not an enemy of man as the black bear is. He loves man only if man will respect him. For, everybody knows, he is the undisputed king of the forest..."

Here, several bustling prayerful ladies, reddened and breathing audibly, came in with, "Har-Har Mahadev!" and told Mahadevji, "You are and You'll be." The *pujari* attended to them. They walked three times round the interior stone pavement running round the pillars which enclosed the idol on a pedestal. It was impossible to talk to the *pujari*, for they kept him busy all the time. I could not even pray, so long as they vociferously conversed with their god, caressing him, besmearing him, putting flowers and washed rice on him—the god with many complexes and attributes.

When the devout worshippers did leave after all, I prodded the *pujari*,"Well, come on, *pujariji*. Tell us your experience."

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He wasn't complimented but he resumed his admonishing trend, adding, "I was telling you that the *shair* is the king of the forest. His eyes, his straight and light bearing, his regal gait tell one that. So one should respect him by not looking straight into his eyes. Look down on the earth, when you meet a *shair*. Don't stare back at him for his anger spells death for the haughty man. Bow before him and he will never touch your hair."

"Enough of that," broke in Brij Nath. "We are getting late now."

"O, no, Brij Nath," I mocked him. "There is no big cat here. Let *Pujari* Sahib tell us his tale."

"Here you are," after all the self-chosen priest was coming to the point. "I come up here early in the morning, earlier than the dawn. I watch the glorious dawn of the mountains from this door. On the way up, it is nearly dark.

"Yesterday as I trudged up, balancing the pitcher on my shoulder with my left hand, and holding a stick with the other, I heard a faint sound near the bend where you find the small Chinar. I thought it was an owl, but the fall of a soft tread made me stop at a standstill. My heart beat fast but I preserved my poise, thanks to this god"—beckoning the shining idol.

"Two red eyes stared at me in the dark. I knew it was a *shair*. I looked down at the path which I could dimly see in the starlight. The two flaming charcoals moved here and there for a split second. Their blurred images burned on my retina as I still looked down, reverently, praying to the *shair* and Siva to protect my life for the service of this god. A growl and the *shair* lashed the path with his tail, producing a sharp, cracking sound.

"The sudden sound unnerved me but I still prayed. With the tails of my eyes, I looked at the dark form, whose very breathing I could hear, I saw only one burning dot. Due to the movement, my staff struck a rock and its steel point rang. In a moment, the figure took a soft leap and was gone."

Was that all"? I said, rather disappointed. But the *pujari* was now lost in the contemplation of the idol, perhaps thanking it once again for

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his deliverance. While we left, I thought how his remarks about the sanctity of a leopard were very much current in Kashmir villages.

LOVER OF MUSIC

Sahepura is a village near Ganderbal—one of the beauty spots of Kashmir. A tributary of the Indus flows by the quiet village. In summer it is not unusual for peasants to rest under the grand Chinar tree after the hard day's toil. There they smoke, cut jokes and watch the thin stream flow placidly by.

I happened to be present at one such meeting. Somebody talked about bears. Habiba gave his interesting bear story (which has appeared in Bear Stories). Mahmudoo, not to be outdone, launched a leopard story. Here it is :-

"You all know that my father-in-law lives at Ajas—"

"Yes," put in Jumma, jocularly, "We know Ajas is your father-in-law!"

"—and Ajas is a small village nestled around the foot of a mountain. The mountain is covered with dense forests and is infested with all beasts of prey that our Mother Kashmir has. I have told you how I came across a bear in the forest who was afraid of us and he ran away like a cat.

"The villagers of Ajas are a merry people. They love singing and dancing. Every year they subscribe for a *Band-i-Jashan* to be celebrated in the big hall of the house of the Zaildar, Ali Sheikh.

The *Jashan* lasts a whole night. Happily I was there, when one such *Jashan* was to be held. My father-in-law was one of the managers. So, I got quite a respectable place around the carpeted square, where the singing party and dancers were to sit and dance.

"The song and dance was at its best at about midnight. There was an interval for tea, highly flavoured Kashmiri sugar tea, *kahwa*, not salt tea that we have here. Then we heard the piercing howling of jackals, it appeared quite near. And then we heard, O, Allah ! we heard a leopard roar outside.Only one window of the hall was open. My father-in-law at once shut it. Instantly there was panic and everyone

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cried, 'Suh Ho!' But my father-in-law, still standing by the window, took command of the situation. He put his fingers on his lips and commanded silence. Nobody seemed even to breathe.

"The leopard struck against the window for it was just above the level of the courtyard. A wooden pane broke and we were horrified to see a paw of the leopard and then another jutting in from another broken pane. Horror was written on the face of everyone. Red apples left the cheeks of Ali Sheikh and the Pir!

"In another moment, the leopard would have broken his way through, but for what my father-in-law did. He calmly lifted the latch and threw the window open. The leopard leaped in. Some shrieks. We crept under our blankets. A few fled out of the hall. The leopard ran after one running servant, caught his *pheran* in his mouth playfully, but did not touch him. We were amazed when we saw the leopard playing like a big cat.

"My father-in-law shouted at the singers, 'You bastard fools! Don't you know what you have to do? This is a devout leopard, the one who visits Haji Sahib's shrine. He has come here for the music. He, I tell you, is a lover of music. Start music at once or, if he gets angry, Allah help you then.'

"The musicians at once started music. The dancer-boy, still trembling, was made to stand up by my father-in-law. Music and dance visibly affected the leopard. He crouched down near the middle of the hall. According to the instructions of some old men, the music and dance programme was kept on at full swing, without even a moment's rest.

"The leopard was, at it were, rooted to the floor, even as this Chinar is rooted to the bank. He stared at the dancer-boy and the musicians. And when the cock first crew, the leopard gave a mighty roar, then stood up. We, nervous all along, were now horrified. All of us were there because Ali Sheikh had not allowed anyone to slip away, much as we would have liked. But thank Allah, the leopard moved about a little, looked at the singing party and then leaped out of the window. He lashed his big tail on the ground and was gone, yes, gone away. Yes the music-lover leopard, you see, did not even touch our hair!"

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THE DEVOUT LEOPARD

We, the members of the Kashmir Fellowship Society, were enjoying a moon-light hike, over Shankaracharya. Shall I tell you what our stay-at-home critics said about such a trip? They, lifting their brows in the accepted highbrow style, deprecatingly, characterised such hikes as 'romantic' experiences. Perched on the stone platform flanking the eastern side of the temple, overlooking Srinagar and its surroundings in the ethereal moonlight, we enjoyed the sight of the moonlit mountains whose topping snows looked indeed romantic and unearthly in the milky light of the full moon. We ate omnivorously and gulped it all down with Kashmiri tea steaming from the big *samovar* Oh! those precious moments were unforgettable. (God willing we will have more of them.)

The talk went round. It somewhat centred on the leopards of Kashmir. I recounted my experience of having greeted a leopard somewhere near the place where we sat, pointing out the spot. A young member (was it Mattoo or Ajodhya Nath?) gave a little shudder. Sham Lal then described his experience which he had in the vicinity of the Shankaracharya Hill at the foot of the opposite mountainside:

"Professor Sahib, I too have seen a leopard just nearby. Come on, Fellowship Society members, listen. Last year we were walking late in the night by the road leading under the yonder mountain from the Cantonment to Srinagar city.

"A Gurkha student was with us. When we passed by the graveyard, situated on the foot of the mountain he said to us, 'Do you know a leopard comes here every Friday night?' and we all roared with laughter.

"But we heard the mysterious sound of a soft but heavy tread, and, believe me, about a hundred yards ahead of us, we saw two glowing eyes of a leopard, as one of us whisperingly said, 'Look, there is the *shair* ; and it was there—"

Sham Lal was interrupted by others who talked of the devout leopards, visiting temples, mosques and graveyards in mountain villages. But Sham Lal forcefully summed up the argument:

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"You ought to know the leopard is a devout animal. He visits graveyards and mosques on Friday nights. My friend saw one near Baba Rishi's mosque (Baba Rishi was a Muslim saint, whose shrine near Gulmarg is visited by Muslims and Hindus alike) on a Friday night. Villagers there see the devout leopard—'an old fellow' they call him—and he harms no man. I was told that our Maharaja once encountered this old leopard and understanding that this king of the forest was the devout leopard of Baba Rishi, our wise Maharaja did not kill him." Believe it or not!

CONCLUSION

There are not so many leopard stories current among the people of Kashmir as there are bear stories. Leopards and panthers are much less depredatory to man and his property. The leopard occasionally takes fancy to dogs and kills a watch-dog or two during the night in a mountain hamlet but that, again, does not cause much loss. The saying is that a leopard never changes his spots. True, it is also that the leopard shows a respect for man and unlike the quarrelsome bear, keeps him at an arms length, so long as possible. A panther, lying in hiding, rarely pounces upon a man just as the tiger of Bengal does.

The leopard is keenly sought by hunters for his valuable fur. In life and after, thanks to the taxidermists, the leopard retains his majesty and the panther, the feminine contours of its small body.

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A Wonder Tale
Jungle Woman of Kashmir

Late in the night, Zooni, raked the cinders in the big hearth. The children were asleep already.

"Look, Ramzana," she said to her husband, who was darning his dirty *chemise* with a big needle, "your tomorrow's meal is ready. You will take it with you to the patch of maize field over the mountain which the cursed Patwari, the son of a prostitute, thrust upon us."

"Yes, that is so," Ramzana replied rather mechanically. "This rusted needle doesn't work. Plague upon it!"

Outside, the night wind of the uplands made the usual noises through the tall firs, spreading pines and the hunchback mulberries. An owl hooted somewhere near. Disregarding what Ramzana had said, Zooni broke in, "Listen to the owl! May thunderbolt fall upon the silly bird. Something bad will happen. But, hark ! What is that? A strange shriek ! Has the 'Jungle Woman' come again?"

"The bear will eat this witch of a 'Jungle Woman' who is haunting you every time," impatiently replied Ramzana. "Do your own work".

Zooni was silent for a while. She again heard strange cries but she dared not comment on them for fear of Ramzana, who was absorbed in his work. Ramzana finished the mending, and then fumbled about in the hay, which covered the dusty mud-plastered floor, saying, "My sickle! My sickle!" Irritated with the fruitless search, he shouted, "Zooni! I've lost my sickle; my faithful sickle.It must be lying in the maize holding. I must fetch it just now. What else can we do?"

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"No, no, Ramzana," Zooni pleaded. "You will get your sickle in the morning. It won't be lost."

"Don't you know the devil that Qadir is," Ramzana said, correcting her. "He goes to the field earlier than we see the morning star. He is a cat, I tell you. He will find the sickle and take it away. Wherefrom shall we get another sickle? The City is one hundred miles away. Floods have cut us off for at least a fortnight till the corrupt, fat Tehsildar will have the bridge repaired over the Bloody Nulla. No, no, Zooni, you sleep, I must go and fetch the dear sickle".

With this he was gone. Zooni ran down to hand him an axe for his protection but he would have none of it. "I shall take a *lathi* to scare away jackals and dogs," he said.

Zooni, left alone, went up to her hay bed. It would be long before her Ramzana would return. He had to cross three upland fields and one mountain brook. Oh !Allah ! keep him safe, she prayed, as she again heard the strange, horrifying sound. Was it the Jungle Woman?

Starlight and the mountaineer's uncanny instinct for tracks guided Ramzana to the maize holding. Jackals howled, slipping away at his approach. Their squeaky howls, being so near, grated upon his ears. Mountain dogs distantly barked in reply. Occasional gusts of wind blew long-drawn notes in conifers and pines. What did he hear? A horrifying sharp sound — a blend of plaintive howl and a fierce growl, unnatural and awe-inspiring. Oh! Zooni was perhaps right. She had talked about the Jungle Woman who had haunted the hamlet for the last week. He alone had disbelieved. He still did. But, before he could further think, to his consternation, he heard this freak of a shriek quite close to him

Ramzana's heart pounded like a hammer within him. Should he run, fly for his life? Yes, that he must. He ran fast, as fast as his legs could carry him. He only knew he was running. He did not know any longer what direction he was taking. To save his neck was his prime concern at the moment.

Something pursued him. It was not a bear though its heavy tread amidst the crashing bushes resembled a bear's step. The creature

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uttered those very terrifying sounds he had heard some time back. Only the Jungle Woman could screech these strange yells. The thought of his possible pursuer electrified Ramzana. He quickened his pace to a very fast gallop, so much so that he discerned that he had left his pursuer far back. But suddenly he stumbled against the stump of a fallen spruce. He fell down the very moment, helpless and exhausted. His head struck against a boulder and the wounds bled on his forehead and right hand. He reeled and became unconscious.

High above on the precipitous mountain, very much above the snow line, in a cave, damp, dark and with a narrow opening, closed by a round boulder, which was used as the door, lived the Jungle Man and the Jungle Woman. They were primitive sub-men of a group that had somehow survived near some remote peaks of the Valley.

The Jungle Man, finding no game for a few days, left on a long expedition with his bone weapons. He did not return for days together. Led by instinct, the Jungle Woman did not so much miss the Jungle Man, as she wanted a mate. Down below in the mountain hamlet, thousands of feet down from her cave, she had seen miniature men walking about, after autumn and in winter, when mist did not mantle the hamlet. Now that the Jungle Man had not come back for a week, she went down into the hamlet every night. There she howled and screeched, keeping away from the lights of the cottages, for she was somehow afraid of them.

Rambling aimlessly, led by her forest-bred instinct, now set on edge by her passion for a man, the Jungle Woman scented a man—poor unfortunate Ramzana on his sickle errand. She whined and yelled to attract his notice but he cut straight across the fields. Then she made towards him, neared him and found him, a lump of a man, heaving insensibly. She pawed him all over, very much like a bear. He uttered low whines of fear and pain. She lifted him and carried him on her broad powerful shoulders, stopping for a while after miles of hilly distance when some sudden sound or other alarm made her alert.

Though unconscious, Ramzana was not quite so, for a long time. When he was carried by the Jungle Woman he had a strange perception of dangling over a hairy bed, which was quite unlike his warm, soft hay bed. Subconsciously, he heard grunts and yells and felt that he

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Now he was—so decreed Allah—the prisoner of this dreadful woman. But he need not fear. Sitting on his knees, he lifted his outstretched hands in prayer and prayed to Merciful Allah to save him. In his prayer, he did not forget his wife and his children. He thought with a pang how his sickle must now be in the usurping hands of Qadira. Allah would curse him and He would blast the cursed Jungle Woman. Something within him, proceeding perhaps from a subconscious reminiscence of folk-tales of witches and Jungle Women, assured him that the wretched Jungle woman would not kill him. She would keep him. He determined to steel himself to live it through till he found a way of escape from this hell of a den.

The thread of his reverie was snapped when the stone over the opening of the cave was pushed to one side, falling with a resounding thud into a watery ditch outside the cave. In came the horrible looking Jungle Woman, more of a bearlike ape than a human form. Her long, woolly hair fell about her intensely hairy, naked body as she came towards Ramzana with bent back and hands outstretched sticking out of hairy paws and showing claw-like nails. The front view of the Jungle Woman showed nothing but the long, thick, black hair of the body out of which large, pendent and swinging breasts fell down, covering the tummy of the heinous creature. Her angular face was not so hairy but it bore a great deal of resemblance to a forest monkey, big, heavy and flat. Her quasi-human form was awesome in the extreme. The small chin protruded from the harsh and hairy jaw bones, which were clearly incapable of speech. Great brow ridges receded farther from the small, bright, fierce eyes. Though almost human, she had baboon traits.

So this was his mistress, in whose power Ramzana lay. As he had already prepared himself, Ramzana did not feel much afraid. The Jungle Woman uttered shrill cries of delight on seeing him there. The shouts reminded Ramzana of the mumbled words of an idiot out of which one could make out nothing. He stared at her, not in horror but in amazement, as she came towards him. She fondled the torn lappets of his *chemise* and caressed his face. He shrunk away from her but there she was again before him, catching hold of his hands, and dragging him a feet or two. Then out of a recess, which Ramzana had not marked, she produced walnuts and forest nuts and berries and scattered them about the cave. Ramzana greedily caught a few and ate them. So did the Jungle Woman.

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was sleepily riding over his father-in-law's newly-bought mare, who was not well broken in yet.

A jackal's howling awoke Ramzana suddenly. He did not realise at once who was carrying him. After a dreamy moment or two, he understood with horror that he was bestriding on the spiky shoulders of a bear, who was grunting and heavily breathing. But no, Oh Allah! it was not a bear! It was... it was, as his dangling legs, touching the hairy, ample, falling breasts told him, the Jungle Woman. The Jungle Woman! He tried to cry only to find his tongue tied and his mouth parched. No, he must cry to invite help. Again, words did not come. His head reeled. The wily creature clutched him faster, uttering something like a savage's yell. Giddiness again mercifully changed into unconsciousness for Ramzana for many many hours. The Jungle Woman trudged on with her man's burden, scrambling up ascents and precipices, miraculously, balancing her weight, till she, in the small hours of the morning, reached her cave, where she deposited it in a corner, covering it with jungle berry leaves and pine twigs.

Late in the morning, Ramzana, feeling his head splitting and rocking, awoke upon the cold and damp bed of filth-laden earth. Where was he? Why wasn't his baby crying? The goat was silent. Zooni was nowhere to be seen. The window was shut but the chinks in the crazy wall should have admitted light. Could it be so very foggy outside? Fidgeting about with his hands, he did not find his tattered quilt over him but he was taken aback on finding leaves and branches about him. What did it mean? He sat up with a start. In so doing his head struck against a protruding stone of the cave. Holding his aching head, where he found fresh scars of last night's wounds, he saw the mouth of the cave blocked with a stone, admitting faint rays of light through apertures at its sides. Last night's nightmare rushed upon his memory. Oh! Allah — here he was, in some plagued cave. Zooni, sweet Zooni, what must she be thinking and doing?

Impatiently throwing away the leaves and twigs, Ramzana stood up. Again his head struck against the low roof. He had to walk with bent back. Over the opening of the cave, he found a round boulder which he could not push off or even move an inch though he applied all his desperate strength to it. Nerve-shattered, he slipped down to his leafy bed and lay down, taking in with his mountaineer's common sense that he was the Jungle Woman's captive. From his childhood, he had heard many stories of witches, she-monsters and Jungle Women.

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Now he was—so decreed Allah—the prisoner of this dreadful woman. But he need not fear. Sitting on his knees, he lifted his outstretched hands in prayer and prayed to Merciful Allah to save him. In his prayer, he did not forget his wife and his children. He thought with a pang how his sickle must now be in the usurping hands of Qadira. Allah would curse him and He would blast the cursed Jungle Woman. Something within him, proceeding perhaps from a subconscious reminiscence of folk-tales of witches and Jungle Women, assured him that the wretched Jungle woman would not kill him. She would keep him. He determined to steel himself to live it through till he found a way of escape from this hell of a den.

The thread of his reverie was snapped when the stone over the opening of the cave was pushed to one side, falling with a resounding thud into a watery ditch outside the cave. In came the horrible looking Jungle Woman, more of a bearlike ape than a human form. Her long, woolly hair fell about her intensely hairy, naked body as she came towards Ramzana with bent back and hands outstretched sticking out of hairy paws and showing claw-like nails. The front view of the Jungle Woman showed nothing but the long, thick, black hair of the body out of which large, pendent and swinging breasts fell down, covering the tummy of the heinous creature. Her angular face was not so hairy but it bore a great deal of resemblance to a forest monkey, big, heavy and flat. Her quasi-human form was awesome in the extreme. The small chin protruded from the harsh and hairy jaw bones, which were clearly incapable of speech. Great brow ridges receded farther from the small, bright, fierce eyes. Though almost human, she had baboon traits.

So this was his mistress, in whose power Ramzana lay. As he had already prepared himself, Ramzana did not feel much afraid. The Jungle Woman uttered shrill cries of delight on seeing him there. The shouts reminded Ramzana of the mumbled words of an idiot out of which one could make out nothing. He stared at her, not in horror but in amazement, as she came towards him. She fondled the torn lappets of his *chemise* and caressed his face. He shrunk away from her but there she was again before him, catching hold of his hands, and dragging him a feet or two. Then out of a recess, which Ramzana had not marked, she produced walnuts and forest nuts and berries and scattered them about the cave. Ramzana greedily caught a few and ate them. So did the Jungle Woman.

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The Jungle Woman did not kill or molest Ramzana. She fetched him jungle fruits and feasted him on raw flesh of the deer, jackal and fox. Seeing that he felt cold she brought jungle hay, soft, dry and long bushels to form his bed. She played with him in a strange way, an admixture of bestial fierceness and fondness of love.

Hearing him groan, cry or shout out the names of Zooni or his children, she tried to ape him, producing only a monkeyish babble. That amused Ramzana but he would bite his lips and curse himself on his helplessness. For every time the Jungle Woman left the cave, she bolted the cave with the big boulder that fitted the opening like a door. Ramzana could not, for the life of him, shift that cursed stone even when he tried for hours. Once the Jungle Woman, pushing aside the boulder, found Ramzana pulling against it from the inside. Emitting fierce growls, she kicked him with her big feet, sending him reeling down. He fell against a jutting rock of the cave, wounding his arm. She clawed him on the face. Finding him bleeding, the Jungle Woman picked out a certain grass out of the hay bed and clumsily bound that over the wounds. The bleeding stopped, as if by miracle. Ramzana thanked her with a silly look wherein despair loomed large. He held his side as he felt his heart throbbing and lay down awhile. The haunting image of his mountain home came before him.

What could Zooni be doing just now? It was more than a month that she had missed him. Did she take him to be dead? And, the children, Allah was their father now. Allah is merciful. No, no, Zooni would not, should not consider him dead. Once, earlier, he had been missing from home for a fortnight when snowstorm and landslides had blocked him in the upper hamlet. Zooni had then bravely hoped for his return. He did return to her. How he had embraced her and the children! The fond memory sent shafts of anguish in his stricken heart as he heard the gawky Jungle Woman striding towards him, coming to pinch him, to nip him and to tease him. He despised her peculiar smell, her hairy form which was almost double to that of his own mountaineer's physique and her overbearing ways with him. He half opened his eyes as the hateful creature crawled towards him. How long would he rot like this? How long, Oh Allah! Oh Pir Dastgir! Oh Saint Shah Hamdan! would he lie helpless as he did? He shut his eyes, inwardly sitting down to prayer in the mosque of Juma Masjid whose interior used to give him peace and calm. He prayed and prayed, not heeding the pinching by the Jungle Woman.

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Suddenly he got up, feeling, like a prey held at bay, the urge to free himself, only to look about the semi-dark, cribbing walls of the cave and damned stone sitting glumly over its opening. She marked his eager look and mistaking it for an expression of hunger, produced fruits and a leg of venison from a recess and placed them before her captive man. Ramzana ate a few after a few minutes till he had composed himself. He must eat, he reaffirmed to himself or he would die. Now he liked the fruits and the raw flesh. They imbued him with a strange, restless energy. He did not feel exhausted in the body though he lived in this damp hole in the mountainside. His growing beard and nails only menaced him, adding to his biting sense of prison life.

Losing count of days in this dark cell Ramzana became impatient with himself at his lack of reckless, dare-devil spirit with which he ought to fight his way out. Next morning when the Jungle Woman was leaving and pushed the stone away, he crept close behind her and before she could place the stone back, he leaped at her. The stone fell back in the pit. The Jungle Woman grappled him, giving out fierce shrieks. Her nails pierced his skin but he did not feel the pain. He bit her hairy hands with his mouth but she only tightened her steel grasp and dragging him, carried him back to his corner and there she kicked him, threw sticks and hay over him and clawed him, besides giving him stunning blows with her ungainly hands.

Ramzana, exhausted, heart-broken and defeated, made no reply. Tears welled in his eyes. He cried piteously. Moaning aloud, he sobbed like a child, "Zooni! I die for you ! Where are you? Oh! what has happened to me? What curse has fallen upon me!" Pity softened the coarse, apish features of the Jungle Woman; she caressed him on the chest though he shrank away from her. She left, cautiously looking behind that Ramzana did not follow her.

A mood of despair, frustration and utter desolation, overwhelmed Ramzana. In his simple way he sobbed and brooded naively. What had he done to merit this? Qadira, his rascal neighbour, now the owner of his sickle, ought to be in his place here. He had an idea that he had spent more than "four tens" of days here. He counted by tens, and, after the third ten, he became confused as to the length of his captivity. Autumn must have changed into winter. The chill winds striking him, when the

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hell of this Jungle Woman came and left, airing the opening of the cave, told him that the crop of his maize holdings must since have been reaped. Who did that? Where was Zooni? Would he ever return to them? He again sobbed, sinking his head in his raised knees as he squatted against the damp wall where a dripping drop of water told him that it was raining outside. Would that the Jungle Woman slipped on the precipice and died! No, she would not. She was hardy. He went up to the chink of the opening of the cave. He tried the stone. It was stuck up in the stone depression outside which acted as its hinge and repelled all his force to be moved. The cursed Jungle Woman was stubborn.

One day he had seen from this hole how a bear crossed her path. Sitting uneasily behind the boulder in the cave, he had revelled that the bear would kill and make a meal of the Jungle Woman. The bear would not of course reach his cave, thanks to the boulder. He had quite forgotten that if the Jungle Woman did not return and open the cave, he would never go alive out of it. But, to his disappointment, not unmixed with amazement, he had seen how the bear, lowering his tail, had simply slunk away at the approach of the Jungle Woman. From that day his fear of the Jungle Woman increased tenfold.

Oh! he wept, cried, prayed. Allah did not hear! Allah has no ears! Was Allah merciful? The Pir said so. But the Pirs were unreliable. He remembered Ali Pir who always stroked his beard to impress his flock in the mosque, but who was secretly adulterous and dissolute. The Pirs traded on the beliefs of the poor like him, Ramzana thought bitterly. No Pir or Allah could save him. He struck his forehead again and again with the palm of his hand. But he cursed his own hand. This arm could not move the stone that held him captive. Could he not tunnel his way out? But the twigs which he had about him could not even make a small hole in the rocky soil. The night would come soon, the long, dark night wherein he rarely found sweet and sound rest as he used to in good old days when he returned home, fatigued and hungry, after the day's hard and loved toil in farm and field. How long back was that? He could not tell. His maddening reverie was broken by the rude, noisy entrance of the Jungle Woman.

The Jungle Woman was strangely unusual this time, Ramzana somehow understood in the fading light. According to her wont, she

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did not close the opening with the stone just after her entrance. Instead she slipped down to the floor and lay there in a huddled but restless heap. Come on, fly away, the cave for once is open, Ramzana bucked himself up. But the necessary pluck did not come. His limbs did not obey his natural impulse. After a while, the Jungle Woman gave herself a shaking, squatted up, looked about and saw the cave open. She gave a quick reassuring look at Ramzana. He was unmoving as a statue, regarding closely her strange behaviour. She seemed to recognise him after an effort and gave a cry wherein surprise and apathy were coupled together. Snorting in a bestial manner, she went up to the opening of the cave and closed it, slowly and dreamily.

For the whole night, Ramzana heard shrill growls and grating squeaks from the corner occupied by the Jungle Woman. Her inexplicable restlessness intrigued him and made him very much afraid of this freak of a cave companion. In this terrible mood, this devilish creature, half woman and half ape as she was, might do anything to him.

Much as he tried, he could not make out what must have happened to her to have so metamorphosed her. Soothing sleep afforded his splitting brain rest for a few hours. But even during his broken sleep he heard her somnolent noises.

Early in the morning, earlier than usual, he heard the familiar heavy tread. His heart beat fast. Was she coming towards him to strangle him? No, thank Allah, thank all the Pirs, she did not. She repaired towards the mouth of the cave and gave the stone a rude push. The fresh breeze of the mountain dawn struck the sensitive nostrils of Ramzana. It reinforced his longing to be back in his fields to lift the hoe early morning and beat the clods into smooth sheets to receive the new kind of maize that he had got through the headman. Oh! presently she slipped down and came, not towards him as she used to when she would fondle and nip him, but near the fruit recesses where a leg of a fox lay rotting. Ramzana could see in the dim light that she picked up a fruit only to throw it against the wall. Her loud munching gave him to understand that she was greedily at the stale flesh. But this was for a while. She crawled about. Ramzana felt his heart sinking, thinking that his end had come. In a trice, she scrambled up to the open mouth of the cave, edged her way out and was gone.

Gone ! Gone ! thought Ramzana. The devilish ape was gone. No, but she would return. He must escape, yes, this very moment. His

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heart pounded against his breast. He had to calm himself by holding his hand against his heart much as his blessed mother—peace be to her soul! — used to when he used to be frightened as a child.

The Jungle Woman did not return, not for hours. Ramzana slothfully clung to his seat. The sun had risen and its light played on the hills. Now he must stir himself or else it may be too late. Slowly, he went up to the opening. After many many dark days and darker nights, he saw the beautiful panoramic view of a mountain sunrise. Where was he? He said to himself, as he peered out of the mouth of the cave. A steep precipice eyed him in the face. How would he climb down? Thank Allah! there was a goat track caressing the mountain-side. He came out of the mouth of the cave to take that. He heard a sound. Was it a screeching bird or was it the Jungle Woman? Instinctively, he retraced his steps and scrambled inside the cave. He listened hard and heard nothing. He came out, bolder than ever before.

The pine forests clothing the copse gave him fresh courage. He would brave the Jungle Woman if she now came in his way. He would die rather than be dragged back into that hell of a cave. In the thick of the jungle, he heard a swift rustling sound and, moving his head in the direction of the sound, he saw a brownish white bestial form drowning into the spruce foliage. A jackal or .... a leopard ! Let it be. I must go ahead, come what may, Ramzana reminded himself. Freedom gave him courage he never possessed before. Walking on and on, for an hour or so, he still found no path or track that he could tell.

To his great relief, Ramzana heard human voices proceeding from somewhere. He fashioned his steps towards the sound, quickly and breathlessly. He reached a craggy ledge and down below, on a broad goat track, he saw two mountaineers walking with their axes on their shoulders. He recognised one as Ahmdoo, of another hamlet. He shouted but words did not come readily to him and he only blurted, "Ahm... Ahm... Ahmdoo... I.... I..I ....Ramzana....help!"

Ahmdoo looked up and stopped, startled, and elbowing his companion, said to him, "Who is this beastly, mad fellow?"

"Some mountain *Faqir*", said the amazed mountaineer.

Words came after all, passionate and piteous, as Ramzana cried, "It is I, Ramzana, who was carried away by the Jungle Woman. I am free.... Help me !"

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Ahmdoo and his companion exchanged amazed looks as Ahmdoo said, "Come down by that track — and slip down."

Ramzana became self-conscious as he saw them gazing at his miserable *chemise* and *salwar* which had gaping holes all over, and his beard and his grizzly hair. As he slipped down, thorny bushes pierced his sides. Getting up he adjusted his *salwar*, and, embracing Ahmdoo, broke into a flood of tears, telling him his tale of woe.

Zooni had given up Ramazana to be dead. She, who already led a widow's destitute life, was simply overjoyed to find Ramzana back though her eyes were unbelieving that it was he, her dear mate, delivered from the clutches of the Jungle Woman, after all. Late in the night, when Qadir and other neighbours sat there, listening to the wonder tale of Ramzana, she said to him, for the umpteenth time. "I had told you it was the Jungle Woman. You would not listen to me, my liver, my life. Praise be to Allah! The Pir told me you would be back." The children wept and laughed, alternately, to find Ramzana back — and they would not sleep.

The calm of the late autumn night was disturbed by the unmistakable yells of the Jungle Woman. She had come again!

"It's she," panted Ramzana, as he took up the axe. His neighbours followed suit. No order of battle was given! Only they cried aloud, "Come out with torches ....axes....*lathis*", "Get your sickles." The rural torches led the party, Ramazana foremost. The freakish yells were distinct and louder. "Find her out! Kill her! Spread out in a semi-circle" thundered Ramzana as the spirit of vengeance rose within him. He ran impetuously and other villagers followed him. They were eight in all. Women cried shrilly and the watch-dogs came with them, barking fiercely.

Ramazana stopped and cried, "There she is... Behind that bush. Beat the bush!"

They all beat the bush with their *lathis*, keeping their axes ready, as they did when they killed a raiding bear.

The light behind showed Ramzana the dark, hairy outline of the Jungle Woman, as she found herself entangled. She leaped at him with the agility of a panther, with a bone weapon in her hand. The swift axe fell upon her woolly head and again, on her dark shoulder and she crashed down. A shout of triumph rose from the mountaineers as Ramzana looked up his bloody axe.

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50
The Shrewish Wife

Leisurely, we talked after our evening meal in our farmhouse. It was threshing time and a busy time for the peasants. Sri Kanth, my servant-cum-manager, and I enjoyed the *hookah* by turns. Satiated with it, I asked Mahmdoo to have a puff. He, of course, would not use the *hookah* but he took off the *chilum* and made the tobacco cinders burn into a last flame with his big-chested pull at it.

"Where were you all these days?" I asked him, stretching myself at ease, hugging the *kangri* (Kashmiri fire-pot) close, with the *pheran* (Kashmiri loose gown) well tucked in at the ends.

"O, sir, what shall I tell you? Don't they say, the Shrewish Wife even scared the Jinn? I was at my wife's father's home."

"Why did you go there?" I said, winking jocularly.

"To fetch my wife, my precious wife," he returned humorously. "And there she and her father detained me for full three days. I could not but obey , for the tale of the Shrewish Wife has taught me, that it is best to compromise with one's wife at the very start rather than do so very late."

"Tell me the tale," I put in. "It appears to be interesting."

Mahmdoo, a talented story-teller—so the villagers say—was more than willing to narrate the folk-tale. He prefaced it with a throat-clearing cough in the conventional rustic way and had a puff at the *chilum*.

Somehow, his natural manner commanded attention. He said:

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"There was a man. His name was Gaffara. He was unemployed. Work did not come his way, though he tried hard to find it. What was worse, his bitter-tongued, shrewish wife gave him hell for being out of work, as if it was his fault.

"Early morning, she pushed him out of his bed, with, 'Get up, you lazy man. Go out and find work.'

"No work to be found anywhere, an idea struck him. 'Come on, buck up, boy Gaffara,' he said to himself.

"In a field he stopped by a mulberry tree, lowering his spade from his shoulder. He dug the earth into a pit for the day.

"Back at home, his wife came out and greeted him, 'So you, lazy man, found work. Come on, where is the money? How long can we go on our old earnings?'

"The contractor will pay me after a fortnight,' he replied, briefly.

"Daily he went out with his spade and dug the pit deeper and deeper till it was shaped into a pretty deep well. The fortnight was over. That evening, his wife, by now grown noisily impatient for his wages, demanded wages roughly.

"Sadly, he replied, 'The contractor said that he will pay me tomorrow. I don't know why he puts me off.' After a thoughtful pause, he added, 'I think, you come with me tomorrow. You can help me out from this rogue of a clever, city contractor.'

"The determined wife made answer, 'That I will', and she added a fair number of abuses, the burden of the song being that her husband was a fool, a simpleton, a stay-at-home 'boy' and so on. He kept quiet for that way alone he could win her silence.

"Next day, Gaffara took his good wife to the well that he had already covered with brushwood and turf, leaving a part only of it visible. Reaching near, he said to her, 'Look into this hole. You'll see the contractor and the coolies working.' As she leant over, he came behind her and pushed her right into the well. Hearing her fall, he ran away. Feeling greatly relieved and running as fast as his legs would carry him, he did not even look back.

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"When Gaffara had run for a long distance he heard a cry after him. Thinking it was her cry, he ran all the faster. The shouts followed him again. He looked back and saw a Jinn, motioning him to stop. It was no use fleeing from the Jinn, he thought, for he would soon overtake him. And he was not so much afraid of the Jinn as he was of his wife. He stopped.

"The Jinn, coming up to him, said, in reply to Gaffara's question as to who he was, 'I am a Jinn. Last night I came to live in the well. Just now a terrible woman fell in there. She frightened me out of it.'

"So that was it. 'That's my wife,' confessed Gaffara. 'I am also running away from her. She is indeed a terrible woman.'

"The Jinn agreed, 'Yes, come on then, We'll run away together.'

"The two runaways reached a city in the evening. There they camped in a *serai*. They held anxious conference as to how they should make both ends meet.

"Fortunately, the Jinn thought of his powers. He said to Gaffara, 'I've an idea. I'll enter the body of the Princess of the king. She will become possessed and mad. No one will beat me out of her as no one here has the power. The king will grow helpless. Then you step in. You can make good money out of driving me out of her by saying aloud the words that I shall tell...' Nothing would be better. It was agreed upon.

"The princess became possessed of the Jinn. The King and Queen were alarmed. They called the best physicians and sorcerers. None could cure the princess. The King then had it proclaimed in the city that he would give ten thousand silver *mohurs* to anyone who would save the Princess.

"Gaffara awaited this development. He went to the palace, dressed as a *hakim*. There he was ushered in the chamber of the Princess. After repeating some sacred words over her, he shouted, slapping her, 'Go away, you Jinn, I command you.'

"There was a loud noise in the room. Every one was expectant. The *hakim* said, "The Princess is cured. The devil has left her.' So it was, as the King saw. The Princess was normal again.

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"The joy of the King and Queen knew no bounds. The *Hakim* was invited to remain in the palace as the royal guest. He was given his huge fee and reward. Gaffara lived a strangely pleasant life, feeling quite at ease now that he was in this wonderful palace, and really away from his wife.

"In the dead of the night, the Jinn entered Gaffara's state room, saying, 'Friend, I am idle now. What shall I do now? I ate well and lived well so long as I had entered the body of the Princess. Now what shall I do?'

"Gaffara puffed at the royal *hookah*" — here Mahmdoo gave a demonstration on his *hookah*, as to how Gaffara must have smoked! and said, 'Now, go and enter the Wazir's daughter."

"The Jinn was pleased. 'That is well said. But you should on no account come there to take me out.'

"Gaffara promised him that. The Jinn left towards the Wazir's house in the dead of the night.

"The Wazir's daughter was possessed. The wise Wazir did not talk about it at once for he thought the King or the people might misunderstand. He secretly consulted his physician and astrologer. There was no cure.

"Days passed. Gaffara, still a royal guest, wondered why he heard nothing about the Wazir's daughter. But after a week, the Wazir came to him and persuaded him to visit the Wazir's house.

"There Gaffara repeated the 'sacred' words as he had done earlier and then cried at the Wazir's daugher, bidding the possessing spirit to leave her body. There was a crashing noise. The Wazir's daughter was freed. Gaffara secured his fee and left.

"In the way the Jinn met him. He was angry, 'Why did you break the promise and free me from the Wazir's daughter?"

"Gaffara looked sad, as he said weakly, 'I saw her coming to the palace. So I came to tell you.'

" 'Who? Whom did you see?'

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"Gaffara, looking sadder still, said, 'My wife: she has come. She has found me out. Allah knows how she is alive.'

"As they were talking, Gaffara's wife came in view. She was crying, 'Faithless Gaffara, I shan't leave you now. Come back to your home.'

"The Jinn looked afraid. He said, "Thank Allah, she wants you only. I must go.' So saying, the Jinn ran away, as if to save his life" Mahmdoo, his eyes glinting with satisfaction at the close attention we had paid him, seemed to come to an end. But I asked him, "Then what did the good wife do?"

"Sure, sir you can guess that she clutched him by the shoulder and took him home. Of course, he was rich now and she must have been kinder to him!"

"So you've learnt this lesson very well," I pointed out, "You always obey your wife."

"Well, Why?" Mahmdoo persisted in the rustic way. "I should have remained at her father's house even for three days more if she had so desired it." He philosophised, "It is useless to go against the grain of a woman, and more, one's wife. In the end she has her will."

I, though unconvinced, argued no longer, for I was feeling sleepy.

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52
The Ear-rings

The whisper ran quick round the village, as it always does. Everybody addressed everybody else, "Have you heard, Ayesha has run away from home!"

"Which Ayesha do you mean?" Inquired one from among the group.

"Why, surely, Ayesha, the matchless beauty, the faithful wife of Habiba, the basket-weaver."

Another peasant, washing his feet in the shallow cold stream, commented poetically, "Hai Allah! what has happened? Laila has run away from Majnun. Zulekha has given the slip to Yusuf."

The hefty Kashmiri peasants, sitting under the majestic Chinar, by the stream, whence wafted a cool breeze, roared a malicious deep laugh. The sun had just set. Towards the west, the evening star added its glittering lustre to the long mountain twilight. The peasants loved to gossip at this hour and thus relieve the tedium of the day's hard toil. As they gave avid ear to the sensational rumour over pinches of snuff and puffs at the *hookah*, which they fraternally shared among themselves, they were joined by 'Gulala, the Nightingale', known for his sweet voice.

He was bursting with news. Before squatting on the turf, he said, gesticulating with his expressive hands. "Ayesha and Habiba had a loud quarrel before she quit the house. He beat her, and, calling her a whore, said to her, 'Go to the one who gave you the ear-rings. May lightning fall on you!' She sobbed, 'You have lost your senses'. That incensed him. He kicked her and slapped her. She too lost her temper and she told him, 'You are a brute, Habiba, you are mad.' Habiba's old

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parents and children stood aside, gaping, not daring to interfere, for they know he is fire, all fire."

After a pause. 'the Nightingale' had a long puff at the *hookah*, while his intrigued audience gathered round him. He continued, "Then poor Ayesha collected her few clothes and tied them in a bundle. She shouted, 'This house is not for me where my own man does not trust me' Then, Habiba told her: 'Go away, you daughter of a bad father. I shall now think that I was never married.' She ran out of the yard followed by a lamb and the dog of the house. None of her four children followed her to the stream which she waded across".

Some of the peasants wetted their lips with their tongues as they relished the yarn. One old farmer, nicknamed 'Foresight', true to his reputation, observed. "Who'll make baskets for us in the long winter now? Habiba was helped by his wife who knew the skill as well as he but it was with her help that he could turn out a lot of the stuff."

In their scheme of things, Ayesha's exit from the village scene was big news, and they carried it to their respective homes when they dispersed with the sage remark of the oldest among them," Allah is great. I pray that He may preserve you from sin. These things happen in the transitory world."

An ominous gloom fell on the home of Habiba, when Ayesha went away. The younger children cried in their hay beds. Habiba's aged father gave fodder to the cattle and his mother went into the kitchen to extinguish the cow-dung cinders. These and many other chores used to be regularly performed by Ayesha, every morning, every evening. No sooner had she gone than the members of the family automatically divided her domestic work among themselves. The children carried water to the cattle in the heavy wooden troughs that energetic Ayesha would handle ever so lightly.

Habiba had to take upon himself the share of labour that his wife did in the rice field. Grim and taciturn, he toiled on uncomplainingly. Earlier, he used to say to the Patwari or the landlord, "We farmers are bulls and work with and like them". Now, he knew, though he did not give vent to the feeling, that he was exerting himself like an ass, the beast of burden sweated worse than the bull. But he was only keeping up appearances. Inwardly, he was afire with jealousy and hurt pride.

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His cheeks were more hollowed than before. He thought constantly of bygone times when he, a sturdy youth of the village, had married Ayesha. How he had adored her!

And she was adorable in those days. Her pearly white teeth were the same, though her complexion had suffered due to the sun. Despite six childbirths her figure was as slim as ever. The four surviving children were his and hers. The eldest, Ali, did not even once talk about Ayesha after she had left. They did not laugh and joke together any more.

A heavy silence pervaded their home. The children uncannily understood that their laughter was unwanted in the house. Even the baby, Habiba's youngest child, showed less of its toothless smile. Giving the spare feed to the baby, Habiba's mother said, "May plague victimise these modern women who can thus leave their own hearths in the hands of others because of a petty squabble with their quarrel-some husbands." Habiba, sharpening his scythe, heard this ex parte indictment.

This was no minor quarrel, he told himself. Biting his lower, thick lip hard and long, he told himself, "I know the ear-rings are the gift of my wife's lover. Who is the man. I would very much like to know, so that I may rip open his stomach with this scythe?" In a frenzy of anger, he clutched his scythe, gnashed his teeth, preparing as if to meet an adversary, the giver of the trinket, whose identity she would not disclose to him.

The matronly hen cackled, followed by a brood of chickens. A beautiful piebald lamb bleated piteously to get near its mother that was tied away. Looking at the lamb pulling at its tether, tears welled in Ayesha's eyes. She stood up and let the lamb loose. Sitting on the threshold, she saw the green paddy fields, beyond her father's cottage, studded with willows and appearing to stretch towards and meet the mountains. The lovely sunset scene did not catch her eye or attention. She stared blankly at the encircling snow-capped peaks. On the highest peak, she thought she saw the form of a man, a farmer, young, handsome, with a scythe in one hand and a basket in the other. The giant man of her imagination enthralled her. But she marked a dark

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frown cross the face. Yes, he scowled at her and lifted the scythe to strike her.

Coming to, she felt more unhappy than ever. Seeing the lamb having its evening suck, she cursed herself for having left her baby behind when she left her home in a hurry. She could not explain to herself the sudden jealousy of her husband. Earlier, she had worn ornaments given to her by her father, and he had not asked pointed questions. The thought of her children made her very much miserable. Would she see them again? Unable to restrain herself, she wept. The free flow of her copious tears somehow soothed her. While she brushed her tears to hide her sorrow she heard a familiar shout in the compound "Mother Ayesha!"

Not believing her eyes, she confronted Ali. As if seven days of their separation had been seven long years, she hugged him and kissed him on the forehead, saying, "My son, dear Ali, you did not forget me?"

"How could I, mother?" Ali replied in his frank way. "I left home on the errand of going with the summer feed of salt to our sheep with the shepherd in the mountain meadow of Sonamarg".

"You're a good boy, my Ali. Now come in and smoke a *hookah* till I prepare salt tea for you."

Ali was besieged by the children in his grand-father's home who shouted, "Merry Ali has come." Disconsolate and sad, Ali summoned a smile to his parched lips and greeted the children. He was itching to talk to his mother. After tea, Ali and Ayesha left the cottage and walked to the bank of the nearby stream.

"What angered father, Mother Ayesha?" broke from Ali's lips.

"The ear-rings and Allah knows what else."

Ali was stunned to hear this. He now understood why Habiba had raved. Looking at her woe-begone face, he addressed his mother, "Dear Mother Ayesha, have you not told father that my would-be father-in-law sent you these ear-rings and that a Pir had given these to him, ordaining that the mother of his future son-in-law should wear

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this bauble as amulet, to guard against harm to me? Mother, you have suffered for me. Why did you not tell him?"

"How could I?" she replied simply. "Your grand-parents and I have kept your betrothal a secret from him for he did not approve of this alliance."

"No, mother Ayesha," Ali decided, "He must know. I shall now hasten to the *marg* and return home in two days."

Ali took his leave from his sobbing mother and the children who had gathered round.

Reaching his home, Ali had a long talk with his father. Habiba was surprised--and gratified. His eyes were opened at last, he confessed candidly . He cursed himself on his folly. Lifting his hands in token of prayer, he said, "Allah! I have sinned in suspecting my faithful wife. Forgive me, O Merciful One!"

On the following day, father and son left to fetch Ayesha back home. Gulala, the 'Nightigale', carried the news to the evening assembly under the Chinar. Neighbours received it with interest and satisfaction. 'Foresight' had his say, amidst laughter, "No worry, brothers, our baskets will come in winter as before. And Ayesha, wearing the ear-rings, will weave them."

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